

A strange way to THINK about Suffering

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[0 : 00] The title today in our talk is A Strange Way to Think About Suffering, because that's what Peter's doing in this passage. He's changing the way we think about Christian persecution, and it begins with lawyers.

We asked that question just before when we were having a break there, when the last time you used a lawyer was. I don't know what you said for that. I don't think I've ever used a lawyer, really, for anything. But are you in trouble that regularly that you have a lawyer?

There are a few around our church, and they're handy to know. They're really handy if you get in a jam and you need someone to fight for you. You see, the whole job of a lawyer is to protect the rights of their clients.

They know the law, they study the fine print, and they step in your place and they say, You're trampling on my client's rights. Back off, or we'll sue.

And we use lawyers for all sorts of reasons. We use them before entering big contracts, buying a house, signing a business deal. But they're also used after the fact, once the trouble has arrived, when we want to take someone to court for trampling on our rights.

[1 : 13] And that seems to be where the churches in 1 Peter are at. They've been living for God in Asia Minor, doing good for Jesus. But they're falsely accused as wrongdoers.

2 verse 12. They attract the ignorant talk of foolish people. That's 2 verse 15. They are slandered. 3 verse 16. Abused. 4 verse 4.

And insulted because of the name of Christ. That's 4 verse 14. You see, doing good has caused them to suffer. So they're taking it as a sign that something has gone wrong.

And so just as if the house you bought turned out to be full of termites, or the business deal turned out to be a bust, they have their lawyers on the case. Dear God, my client is experiencing suffering on your behalf.

This wasn't part of the deal when they signed. This isn't the version of Christianity they thought they were being sold. You see, maybe they thought they were signing up for the prosperity gospel.

[2 : 21] We're doing good results in health and wealth and blessings now. Maybe they thought they were signing up for the popularity gospel. We're being a Christian means middle class, leafy suburbs, great friends and being respected by everyone.

Peter's churches were shocked that they were suffering. They saw it as a sign that something was broken and that someone, probably God, was in breach of contract.

For us today, understanding Peter's response might be the difference between making it as a Christian or not.

Because his answer is some of the clearest teaching on what it means to follow Jesus. If we don't understand what Peter's saying, when persecution comes, like these churches, we'll want to sue God for breach of contract.

This isn't what I signed up for. And so you should have a handout there. And we're at point number one, verse 12 in 1 Peter chapter 4.

[3 : 32] 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. In a nutshell, Peter's answer is, what did you expect?

You see, the churches were shocked. They thought that being abused for Jesus was something strange. Peter says, do not be surprised. You follow a crucified king.

What did you expect was going to happen? If Jesus suffered for doing good, why are you surprised that you are suffering for the same reasons?

And what Peter does is put a totally different spin on their experience. He says, verse 12, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you.

It's language he uses from chapter 1. Back then, he said, trials were there to test our faith.

Remember, he compared faith with gold.

[4 : 32] He said, just as gold is refined by fire, so too Christian faith when the heat gets turned up so that it results in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

That's chapter 1, verse 7. You see, it's not a sign of a dodgy God or weak faith. Fiery ordeals are a sign of the genuineness of our faith.

Peter says, change the way you think about your experience. Suffering is God's test. It's the way he sought superficial faith from the genuine article.

These trials, they refine us now, just like gold, so that we're ready to meet Jesus with praise, glory, and honor on that final day.

And that is the logic that will change surprise to joy. Don't be surprised, verse 12, but rejoice, verse 13. It's a strange way to think about suffering.

[5 : 38] Verse 13, rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ. Now, it's not that we enjoy suffering.

It wasn't fun at my brother's wedding when all his high school mates sat around the table telling me what an idiot I was for believing Christian things. It wasn't fun in my office when they laughed at me because I tried to start up a prayer group.

It's not that we enjoy suffering, but it is a joy to participate in the life of Jesus. It is a joy to walk in his footsteps, to be abused or suffer the same way he was.

Suffering Christians can feel a joy now and, verse 13, be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Overjoyed because we'll be on the right side of him when that time comes.

You see, it's all very well to follow Jesus when it comes to forgiveness and heaven and community, but what about a discipleship that participates in his suffering?

[6 : 50] You see, that's when the rubber hits the road as far as God is concerned, and that's when it's tempting to reach for the lawyers. My client signed up for a popularity gospel, not a persecution one.

Yes, suffering for doing good is still suffering. It will feel like a fiery trial at the time, but think about how God is using that to purify you, to prepare you like gold for when his son arrives.

Think about what you're saying to Jesus about how much you're willing to be partners with him.

Yes, in the good stuff, but also in the abuse, in the trenches of your workplace, in the trenches of modern Melbourne life, where the rubber hits the road.

Suffering now, but rejoicing now, and being overjoyed in the future. It's the opposite way to think about suffering.

It's the opposite to surprise and shock as though something strange were happening. And it's the same idea in verse 14. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

[8 : 10] It's another opposite idea where being insulted is actually a blessing. To make his point, Peter uses an Old Testament idea where the Holy Spirit rests on God's chosen ones.

That's what happened to Saul and to King David. When they were chosen, you can see when they were chosen, the spirit of the Lord rests on them.

It marks them out. That's what we heard in our Old Testament reading, which Mark brought us before. In Isaiah, he predicts a time when the spirit will rest on God's chosen one.

And in the Gospels, when Jesus is baptized, as he sees heaven torn open, the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. It marks out who God's special ones are.

You see, being insulted for the name of Christ, it might be a sign to the rest of the office as to who the gullible and stupid Christians are. It might be a sign that you're all alone and that you're anything but special.

[9 : 21] But Peter says it couldn't be more opposite. God's spirit, or in God's eyes, it's a sign reserved for his special ones.

In fact, we couldn't be closer to God at that moment, suffering for the name of Christ, the spirit and of God, Father, Son, Spirit resting on us.

We couldn't be closer to God when we're suffering. See, that is the logic that can stare insults in the face and count them as blessing.

Peter says, change your thinking. Verse 15, If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

This verse, Peter wants to make sure that we're suffering for the right reasons. You see, if I'm suffering for sinful behavior, that's actually a good thing.

[10:20] That is justice. Maybe I belong in jail. If I'm suffering at work because I'm lazy on the job, then that is a good thing. I don't deserve the promotions or respect.

I might deserve to be shown the door. If I'm excluded from social circles, maybe the problem isn't my Christianity, but that I'm an idiot. I'm just loud and obnoxious.

Verse 15 says, Don't suffer as a meddler, which I think in our context could be when we forget that this is no longer a Christian culture and we run around trying to impose Christian morality on people who aren't Christians anymore.

You see, if we're abused for that, that's not God's fault. That's probably because we're being annoying. We don't get to blame God for that. Peter says, Make sure your suffering is for the right reasons.

If murderers, thieves, and other kinds of criminals, if they suffer for their sins, that is a good thing. That is a sign that there's justice in the world, that there's a common grace at work where if you do good, generally, people appreciate you.

[11:33] In chapter 3, verse 13, he says, Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? The answer is no one. People generally appreciate when people do good.

There's a general pattern of justice in the world. But there's also another pattern at work which 1 Peter is full of, and it's completely summarized by verse 16.

However, if you suffer as a Christian, that summarizes the nub of the issue in 1 Peter. If you suffer as a Christian, there is another pattern at work in the world.

If you suffer as a Christian, you have two options, A and B. Firstly, we can see it as a sign that something is broken. We'll reach for our lawyers in shock and surprise.

My client will be doing no further good, thank you very much, not so long as there is suffering involved. And I reckon that mindset will be the end of your Christianity.

[12:38] The other option is to change your thinking, to expect suffering, because that's what happened to Jesus, because that's what's involved in walking in his footsteps and being one of his disciples.

That's what it means to be partners with him. In the good stuff, but also in the suffering. That way, verse 12, you'll not be surprised as though something strange were happening to you.

Thinking the way Peter does, you'll be able to see suffering as a joy, verse 13, as a blessing, verse 14, with no shame, verse 16, but praising God that you bear that name.

You see, this mindset is future-focused. When Jesus' glory is revealed, it's preoccupied with God's verdict, with his opinion, with his judgment, rather than the fear of man.

And judgment is the idea in our remaining verses. This is our second point. Verse 17, For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household.

[13:50] And if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who don't obey the gospel of God? And if it's hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Peter's point is that Christian suffering proves that final judgment is on the way.

Verse 17, It is time for judgment to begin with God's household. See, Jesus, in the Gospels, Jesus talks about the signs of the end times, the end of the world.

He says there are certain signs to watch out for. One of those signs is general suffering. So earthquakes and famines and wars and rumors of wars.

But the other sign is of the persecuted church. He says when you see God's people handed over to councils and flogged, when you see brother betraying brother, when people hate us because of Jesus, that is a sign of the end times.

And that is actually a good thing because the end times, final judgment means our salvation. Final judgment is where the suffering Christian gets justice.

[15:08] It's where they're proved right. that all their suffering was not in vain. You see, we might see our suffering as a sign that God has lost control, but realize that his timing is on track, that everything is working out according to his plans, just as Jesus predicted.

verse 17. It seems to suggest that Christians are judged too, but it doesn't mean that in the classic sense of the word. It's judgment with a little j. Christians are saved.

We're not condemned. Jesus takes our penalty on the cross. All of those things are still true. These judgments are trials that purify us, the trials we've been talking about so that we're ready for the end.

Peter says, Think of them like the loving discipline of a father who's preparing his household for the end. The illustration is this.

The illustration is of a household in the bush. You know, when households clear their properties in preparation for summer, so they chop down the trees and they get rid of the undergrowth, sometimes they deliberately burn the back fields.

[16 : 25] When you see people clearing their properties like that, it's a sign of the times. It's a sign that bushfire season has begun. And at the time, it's rough and it's messy.

It's unpleasant for the poor old gum tree right next to the house. That guy gets the chop. But it's not a sign that things are out of control or that things have gone wrong because this is a house with a plan.

They are ready. They're prepared. for what's coming next. Peter says, change your thinking. Christian suffering proves that final judgment is on the way.

The persecuted church is a sign that God's grand plans for the ends are beginning. He says, think about trials as though God is a father preparing his household for what's coming next.

Verse 17, and if judgment begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? Verse 18, what will be the outcome of the ungodly and the sinner?

[17 : 38] Peter asks this question twice. He doesn't answer it but just hangs it out there in the air. it's almost as though it's too horrible to answer.

You see, if God is prepared to put his own household through fiery trials, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Peter's very blunt and brutal in his language here so let me be a bit more gentle.

If you're listening in and you're not a believer, please don't let the fact that your Christian friends suffer for their faith stop you from joining with them.

God is using their trials to make them ready for what's coming at the end. All Christian suffering are little signs that final judgment, final vindication and justice are on the way.

We're going to finish today with verse 19 which is the application. Verse 19, it's like a checklist to see if your thinking has changed.

[18 : 45] Verse 19, So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good. Verse 19 is three checks to see if our thinking has changed.

So firstly, do we realize that our suffering is neither strange nor surprising but actually, verse 19, according to God's will that his plan is for us to suffer now just the way Jesus is so that we can share in his glory when it comes.

Or, are we preparing our inner lawyers to sue God for breach of contract? During suffering and trials, are we, verse 19, committing ourselves to our faithful creator?

God has all the power and the goodness of the creator, all the dependability of the faithful one. Is there anyone else more qualified to turn to when our suffering makes us want to run away?

Thirdly, will we continue to do good? It would be very easy not to. Especially in a culture like ours where doing good for Jesus might be treated as though you're doing bad.

[20 : 09] We'll only do good if we trust God, that he is good and powerful, that he is faithful and dependable, and that he has a plan for the universe, and that his judgment is the only one that matters.

So let me pray as we finish. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are using trials to prepare us for what is coming.

Please change the way we think about suffering. We pray, Father, for those of us for whom life is easy. Please arm us with a mindset that suffering wouldn't catch us off guard, but that we should expect it in this world.

And Father, we pray finally for those who are facing suffering. Would they entrust their souls to you, the faithful creator, so that they can confidently keep doing good?

Please, Father, change the way we think about suffering. In Jesus' name, Amen.