

Human beings look at suffering as an *abnormal* condition of life. When things become unpleasant we long for things “to get back to ‘normal.’” But why do we think this way? People universally suffer and die. Why should we think suffering is abnormal when it is a normal experience of life? Jobes says it’s because within us there is a “lingering echo of life in Eden as God created it before the fall” (286). Suffering was *not* a part of God’s original design and we still feel that internally.

Suffering is not an eternal arrangement either. Some day God will restore creation to Edenic conditions. There will be no more curse (Rev. 22:3). “He will wipe away every tear . . . there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.” (Rev. 21:4) Believers, along with the rest of creation, have an inward sense of this as well (Ro. 8:18ff).

Though suffering is not normal to God’s original design, it is not something that should surprise us either. Peter tells us,

4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

4:13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

4:14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

In these verses, Peter may have seen the persecution of Nero on the horizon when both he and Paul were killed. The “fiery ordeal” in verse 12 isn’t simply the normal suffering that all people experience; it is called “sharing Christ’s sufferings in verse 13, and being “reviled for the name of Christ” in verse 14. Then in verse 16, it is called “suffering as a Christian.” The suffering has at its root the fact that believers are living the way that Christ did and as a result, are identifying with Him in His experiences.

Elsewhere in the Bible we learn that trials produce endurance and that endurance will have its perfect result, so that we will become complete, lacking in nothing (Ja. 1:3-4). But the reason given by Peter for rejoicing in the midst of suffering is not because we will grow in our faith; it is because our suffering is the proof that we are on the right road in attaining joy “at the revelation of His glory” (4:13b).

“So that” in verse 13 expresses the result of our present suffering; suffering results in our ability to experience the fullness of joy at His coming. In other words, by suffering as a Christian we know that we are walking as Jesus walked. The more we suffer for our faith, the greater our assurance and joy should be. Therefore, we have no reason to respond with bitterness, because our sufferings are not merely our own. They are also Christ’s sufferings (v. 13).

Furthermore, we are blessed because in the midst of trials, “the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us” (v. 14). The words recall Isaiah 11:2 which says of the Messiah that “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him.” The “Spirit of glory” conjures up the imagery of the temple filled with the glory of God. God will not abandon us in the midst of suffering, rather, in a unique way, He will make His presence known through

the power of the indwelling Spirit. Suffering will thus become a means of blessing us with the presence of God that cannot be known in any other way.

“Good tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded by Nero. Paul's last letter was probably 2 Timothy. Imagine for a moment that his trial had already begun. He is called before the court. Everyone knows his days are numbered. He's a marked man. None of his friends stand by him. He makes his defense. The decision is made to hear him once again—then the end. He goes back to his quarters and writes these words to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:16–17), ‘At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.’ . . . This means that in the hour of greatest trial there is a great consolation. In great suffering on earth there is great support from heaven. You may think now that you will not be able to bear it. But if you are Christ's, you will be able to bear it, because He will come to you and rest upon you” (Piper).

In these three verses we learn that we can rejoice in suffering (1) if we are not surprised by it, (2) if we recognize it as in God's plan and having purpose, (3) if we see that it is evidence of union with Christ, and (4) if through it we know that we will experience the power of the Spirit in a unique way. In verse 16 we learn that through suffering we glorify God – which gives us even another reason to rejoice.

4:15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 4:16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

Verses 15 and 16 clarify the type of suffering Peter is talking about; the blessing of verse 14 does not come when suffering for doing what is wrong. Peter had asked “what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?” (1 Pet. 2:20). The obvious answer is that there is none. What finds favor with God is “if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly” (1 Pet. 2:19). Suffering for the right reasons brings glory to God.

“God gets glory from us when the way we speak and live shows that He is glorious. If you trust Him, you show that He is gloriously praiseworthy. If you rejoice in suffering for His sake, you show that He is gloriously more valuable than the pleasures and approval of man. If you do good to your persecutors instead of retaliating, you show that He is gloriously sufficient to satisfy your longings. The one all-consuming desire of true Christians is that Christ be glorified in their bodies whether by life or death.” (Piper)

4:17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

4:18 AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? (Prov. 11:31)

Verse 17 describes the fiery ordeal of verse 12 as God's judgment that starts with his own people, and then consumes unbelievers.

This may seem to be a strange concept to Christians today who feel that because of Christ they are not subject to the judgment of God, much less due any suffering or penalty. And certainly there is unanimous teaching among the NT writers that there is no condemnation for those who believe in Christ and that they will be delivered from the destiny that is coming to those who disobey God by rejecting the redemption He provides in Jesus Christ. But there is ample teaching that Christians will nevertheless be judged and that it is their standing with Christ that will bring this judgment to a good end (e.g. Rom. 14:10).

Peter assumes that his Christian readers will be judged along with the rest of humanity. Moreover, his thought is informed by the tradition in Judaism that when God judges, He will begin with His own people, and in fact, with the elders at the temple (Jer. 25:29; Ezek. 9:5-6; Amos 3:2; Zech. 13:0; Mal. 3:1-5)" (Jobes, 290-291).

However, as Jobes points out, the original contexts of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi don't fit Peter's usage, for those passages are speaking of God's judgment due to the peoples' disobedience. Peter is saying the exact opposite; Peter's readers are suffering for their obedience. Nevertheless, these OT verses support the principle that God often uses the unbelieving to judge His people, (also see Rev. 2:9-11).

Perhaps the key to understanding this verse is in the meaning of the word "judgment." Judgment can speak of the condemnation and penalty or punishment that follows. This is how the word is used in Romans 3:8, Galatians 5:10, II Peter 2:3, Jude 4, and Revelation 17:1. If this is what is intended, then this would be saying that the Christian's suffering at the hands of unbelievers is God's punishment for their sinfulness. This fits the above OT references, however, as it has already been stated, this doesn't fit Peter's point very well; Peter is talking about suffering for Christ in a way that brings glory to His name (v. 16).

The word "judge" can also refer to "the action of a judge" without the assumption that the verdict is negative and punishment will follow. This is more likely what is meant here. God will begin the process of judging humanity to determine who is truly His – and this process begins with His own people (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). In 4:12 God said that the "fiery ordeal" is to "test" us. The process of testing something draws out the true nature of the thing tested. The future judgment of all people, the great sorting of humanity, begins with the house of God. The Great Tribulation period, prior to Christ's return is the most severe form of this testing (Jobes, 293).

In other words, God is using the suffering inflicted on Christians by unbelievers as the test to determine who is really in Christ, not to condemn them. This is one reason why suffering is the will of God (2:21ff; 3:17). 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." In an odd way, our suffering is a piece of the final judgment to come.

This interpretation also fits well with verse 18: “if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?” (cf. Prov. 11:31) Reference to the difficulty in being saved is also found in Mark 13:20 and Luke 13:23-24. The thought is not that salvation is difficult for God to secure, but that it is difficult for Christians to remain faithful to Christ to the end. The question is, will suffering and insults, or hardships of any kind drive us back to a pagan life and rejection of Christ (Matt. 13:20-21)?

So if God allows His people to be tested through the persecution of unbelievers, how should His people respond? The answer comes in verse 19.

4:19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

“People who try to solve the problem of suffering by saying it is not God's will in any sense, must take a long detour around this verse. If the fiery ordeal is the judgment of God beginning at the church, then it is His will that we suffer. We must not dishonor God by thinking that every time we suffer, He has dropped the reins. His ways are strange, but they are His ways. And our duty is to trust that He is a faithful Creator who only has our best interest at heart”(Piper).

Trusting God was Christ's response to suffering as well. 1 Peter 2:23 says of the Savior, “while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.” God's great purpose in all our suffering will be accomplished when we do what Jesus did in the agony of the cross. There He cried out (Luke 23:46), “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit.” He entrusted himself to a faithful Creator. Christ's example was left as “an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:9, God's purpose in suffering is to cause us to no longer rely on ourselves, but on Him who raises the dead.

The end of verse 19 reminds us that because He is our Creator He has the right to judge His people. To use Paul's argument in Romans 9, “the Potter has the right over the clay.” It also tells us that the way we trust is by “doing what is right” in spite of how difficult life is (note: the NASB could be misread as meaning that we should trust God to do what is right; in this case the ESV more clearly conveys the meaning of the text - “entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” –also Grudem, 191; Jobes, 295; Hiebert, 277).

By way of application, Piper makes an interesting observation. He says, “A true Christian must be willing to say, ‘I will not renounce Christ, even if it costs my life.’ . . . But as soon as we say that, it makes a whole lot of things in our lives look ridiculous. I will die for you, but I can't find time to sit and read your teaching each day. I will die for you, but prayer doesn't seem real. I will die for you, but I can't talk to Jim about you at work. I will die for you, but I can't support your cause with more than 10% of my income. One of the best ways to bring wonderful Christ-honoring changes into your life is to measure your way of life by your willingness to die for Jesus.”