

SERMON

Participating in Christ's Suffering (1 Peter 4:7–17)

By Pastor Jerry Truex; May 8, 2011

A. Introduction

Today we will look at what it means to participate in the sufferings of Christ. We will look at this from the perspective of 1 Peter.

B. Who were the recipients?

The recipients of 1 Peter—both Jewish and Gentile Christians—lived on the margins of society outside of legal and political power.

1. "Transient strangers" and "resident aliens" (1 Pet. 2:11)

Peter calls the recipients "transient strangers" (*parepidēmoi*) and "resident aliens" (*paroikoi*); "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11; NRSV)

- As "transient strangers" (*parepidēmoi*), they were foreigners dislocated from their homeland.
- As "resident aliens" (*paroikoi*), they were landless people from abroad who had recently taken up residence. They were noncitizens, day laborers without hope of permanent and respectable work. As foreigners from abroad, their languages, clothing, and customs exposed them to resentment, slander, and suspicion.

2. A suffering community

Peter also describes the recipients as a suffering community. Suffering is mentioned twenty-two times in 1 Peter.¹

The letter itself offers one clear explanation for their suffering. They were being verbally attacked and humiliated. They were "blasphemed" (4:4), "insulted" (2:23; 3:9), "slandered" (2:12; 3:16), "disparaged" (3:16), and "reproached" (4:14).²

¹ It is unlikely their suffering was the result of persecution from an official anti-Christian policy by the Romans. There are no references to Roman hostility, trials, or executions, nor are there any anti-Roman comments in 1 Peter. In fact, 1 Peter advises readers to respect authority and honor the emperor (2:13-17), advice hardly conceivable if Christians were being persecuted by Rome.

² The terms are overlapping synonyms. See "Blasphemō and Its Semantic Relations," chapter 4 in Jerry Truex, *The Problem of Blasphemy: Early Jewish Understandings and the Fourth Gospel* (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, England, 2002).

Why were they verbally attacked and humiliated? 1 Peter 4:14 says, “because of [the] name of Christ” (4:14)³ and because they were labeled *Christianoī* or “Christians” (4:16).

It is likely that the label *Christianoī* originated in Latin-speaking circles.⁴ From a Latin or Roman perspective, Christ had been viewed as a criminal, shamefully crucified years earlier, and anyone who continued to follow him was considered superstitious and foolish.⁵ Thus, *Christianoī* was not originally a self-designation, but came from others (Acts 11:26) and was used in a mocking way (Acts 26:28).

The bottom line is that the recipients suffered from being foreigners, but they were primarily suffering because they were followers of Jesus Christ, Yeshua, and from the perspective of the Romans, a “failed” Jewish messiah who was executed by Rome.

C. Guidelines for the Christian Community (4:7-11)

Now let’s look at the text we read this morning. Peter is giving a series of exhortations that can be summarized as *eschatological ethics*. In light of the fact that *the end is near*, he says, pray (4:7), love (4:8), be hospitable (4:9, and exercise spiritual gifts (4:10-11)

1. The Foundation of Ethics (4:7a)

⁷ The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.

⁷ Πάντων δὲ τὸ τέλος ἤγγικεν. σωφρονήσατε οὖν καὶ νήψατε εἰς προσευχάς·

Peter believed that the end of history was imminent, was “near”. The End involved the Final Judgment (4:6).⁶ Peter roots his ethical exhortations in eschatology; that is, how we live today (ethics) is shaped by what we expect in the future (eschatology). The future conditions the present.

The Christian is to live in light of the nearness of The End, which is defined by Christ’s resurrection. Although we live in This Age, Christ’s resurrection inaugurated The Age to Come. We live in This Age, but Christians already experience the Age to Come; it is near; it is imminent.

³ Author’s translation. The phrase *en onomati Christou* can be understood as causal, following Elliott, Kelly, Waltner, and other recent commentators.

⁴ Elliott (*1 Peter*, 789) states that *Christianos* uses “a borrowed Latin ending (-ianos [Gk.] from -ianus [Lat.]) or an underlying Latin formation in its entirety.” When the suffix -ianus is attached to a proper name (e.g., Christ), it indicates an associate or partisan of the one named.

⁵ This is supported by the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44.3), who wrote: “Christus, from whom the name [*Christiani*] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and hateful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.”

⁶ Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 236.

Christian community—the Christian sense of value, self-worth, and identity—is rooted in the eschatological hope inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection. Christian community is defined by Christ’s End-Time resurrection, not by This Age or our culture.

2. Exhortation One: Be serious, be disciplined (4:7b)

⁷ The end of all things is near; therefore be serious [σωφρονέω] and discipline [νήφω] yourselves for the sake of your prayers

‘ Πάντων δὲ τὸ τέλος ἤγγικεν. σωφρονήσατε οὖν καὶ νήψατε εἰς προσευχάς·

The first resource for preserving the Christian community that is facing a hostile culture is serious disciple.

a. Mental and moral effort

To the persecuted and suffering church, Peter gives us two imperatives: “Be serious.” “Be disciplined.”

- “Be serious” (σωφρονέω) can also be translated “be of sound mind, be in your right mind.” This refers to *mental effort*.
- “Be disciplined” (νήφω) can be translated “be sober, be self-controlled.” This refers to *moral discipline*.

Peter is saying, “Let us use our heads, let us be disciplined, in line up with the values of the resurrected Christ and not by the values handed to us by our culture.”

It requires mental effort and moral discipline to align with Christ. If we lack mental effort and moral discipline, we will be assimilated by our culture.

b. Prayer

Notice what Peter says about prayer: When we exercise mental effort and moral discipline it *so that you can pray* (*eis* indicates purpose/result).

If you are having trouble praying, it could be because you are not putting enough mental and moral effort into aligning with the will of God.

Some will say that prayer doesn’t work—“I’ve tried it and I don’t get what I ask for.” Peter gives a response to that. He says only when you exercise mental and moral effort *can you pray rightly*. Prayer doesn’t work unless one has trained the mind and will to align with Christ.

It is especially difficult to pray if our society mocks or is hostile to the values of Christ. We suffer when we try to maintain allegiance to Christ and our culture mocks and snubs Christ.

Our minds are targeted by advertisement, entertainment, and political ideologies that is hostile to way of Christ. Our culture has taken the seven deadly sins—pride, anger, greed, gluttony, lust, envy, and sloth—and turned them into virtues and advertising slogans.

Our mind is the arena of spiritual warfare. Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

3. Exhortation Two: Love (4:8)

⁸ Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

⁸ πρὸ πάντων τὴν εἰς ἑαυτοὺς ἀγάπην ἐκτενῆ ἔχοντες, ὅτι ἀγάπη καλύπτει πλῆθος ἁμαρτιῶ

The second resource for preserving the Christian community that is suffering persecution and facing a hostile culture is love.

Peter’s second exhortation is to “maintain constant love.” This is a present continuous imperative. It is love that is steadfastly pursued. I would define “love” (*agapē*) as seeking what is best for the other; seeking the welfare of the other person—the Golden Rule.

Matt. 7:12. So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (NIV)

When people are suffering loving one another become especially important “because love covers a multitude of sins.” What does “covers a multitude of sins” mean? It looks like Peter is paraphrasing Proverbs 10:12.

Prov. 10:12. Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. (NRSV)

Since hate and love are opposite, then “stirring up strife and dissension” is the opposite of “covering offenses.” With that in mind, Peter’s phrase, “love covers a multitude of sins,” means that love reduces strife and dissension.

Love brings peace to our relationships. Love expresses and evokes positive emotions in our conversations.⁷ We add suffering to the world when we give offense, when we fail to speak with love. We add suffering to the world, not

⁷ Martin Seligman writes, “Other people are the best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up... we scientists have found that doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise we have tried.” Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 20.

only when we give offense, but also when we take offense, when we fail to listen with love.

1 Peter 3:9. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. (NRSV)

How can you “let love cover a multitude of offenses.” One way is suggested by Martin Seligman, a psychologist who promotes “positive psychology.” Seligman suggests that the next time you are talking with someone, try to respond “actively and constructively.”⁸ That is, try to affirm the other person and what they are saying. Listen actively and attentively. Stop what you are doing, look at them, and then paraphrase back to them what you heard.

4. Exhortation Three: Be Hospitable (4:9)

⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining.

⁹ φιλόξενοι εἰς ἀλλήλους ἄνευ γογγυσμοῦ,

The third resource for preserving the Christian community that is suffering persecution and facing a hostile culture is hospitality.

Peter’s third exhortation is “be hospitable”.⁹ The Greek word for “hospitality is φιλόξενοι—a compound word combining “love” (φίλος) and “strangers” (ξενοι).

Hospitality is a specific example of loving one another—“this time by receiving others into our homes, making them feel welcome, meeting their needs, and providing for them a place of fellowship and acceptance.”¹⁰

Peter knows it is easy to make it look like you are loving and hospitable, but internally grumbling. So, Peter adds, “without complaining.” Peter wants open homes and open hearts.

Hospitality was the foundation of the early Christian movement. And since Peter is addressing believers scattered all over Asia Minor—resident aliens and transient strangers (2:11)—they knew firsthand the important of hospitality.

The phrase, “for one another” (εἰς ἀλλήλους), suggests that hospitality functioned among the local community of believers. Members of their own community apparently needed food and lodging. Peter expected his readers to

⁸ There are four types of communication: (1) Active and constructive, (2) passive and constructive, (3) active and destructive, and (4) passive and destructive. See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 48-51.

⁹ φιλόξενοι is an adjective with imperative force.

¹⁰ Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 238.

open their homes for worship and fellowship, but also open the home to meet the basic needs of food and shelter.

5. Exhortation Four: Exercise Your Gifts (4:10-11a)

¹⁰ Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹ Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ ἕκαστος καθὼς ἔλαβεν χάρισμα εἰς ἑαυτοὺς αὐτὸ διακονοῦντες ὡς καλοὶ οἰκονόμοι ποικίλης χάριτος θεοῦ. ¹¹ εἴ τις λαλεῖ, ὡς λόγια θεοῦ· εἴ τις διακονεῖ, ὡς ἐξ ἰσχύος ἧς χορηγεῖ ὁ θεός, ἵνα ἐν πᾶσιν δοξάζεται ὁ θεὸς διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ,

The final resource for preserving the Christian community that is suffering persecution and facing a hostile culture is the exercise of spiritual gifts.

The End, the resurrection of Christ, has prompted "Peter to exhort believers to love one another beyond the idea of hospitality; they are to use their gifts 'to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms'."¹¹

Peter is echoing Paul's idea that the church is the Body of Christ and that each member plays a vital role; each member has spiritual gifts that serve the Body as a whole. In the Body of Christ, no member dominates and no member is expendable. There are no dead organs in the Body of Christ. If you are in the Body of Christ, you have a vital role to play in building up the Body.

Whatever gifts or abilities a Christian has, Peter emphasizes they should be exercised in such a way that reflects their divine origin and purposes.

"If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies." If you sing, sing with the voice of God. If you paint, do so with the hand of God.

The point is: When you exercise your spiritual gifts, you represent God, and your gifts are instruments of divine grace, conduits of God's power.

Col. 3:17. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (NRSV)

¹¹ Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 239.

6. To God be the Glory (4:11b)

To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

ὧς ἐστὶν ἡ δόξα καὶ τὸ κράτος εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, ἀμήν.

Peter ends with a doxology of praise. The question is: Who is praised? God or Jesus? The doxological clause begins with the relative pronoun, “to whom” (ὧς) and there is a question about whether “to whom” refers to Jesus Christ, the immediate antecedent, or God, who is the subject of verse 11.

D. Sharing in Christ’s Suffering (4:12-17)

At this point, Peter makes the starting claim that believers must share in the suffering of Christ and that suffering is unjust suffering.

1. Exhortation: Don’t be surprised by your trials (4:12)

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

¹² Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ ξενίζεσθε τῇ ἐν ὑμῖν πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν ὑμῖν γινομένη ὡς ξένου ὑμῖν συμβαίνοντος,

Peter reminds the recipients that he has been addressing their suffering, which he calls “a fiery ordeal” (πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν).

Just as Jesus Christ was the target of evil and suffered innocently, so also believers must be prepared to suffering for righteousness sake. He or she must be prepared to encounter emotional and physical pain, even if (or especially if) that believer is living a holy, just, and peaceable life.

2. Counterproposal: Rejoice in suffering with Christ (4:13)

¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

¹³ ἀλλὰ καθὼ κοινωνεῖτε τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν χαίρετε, ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ χαρῆτε ἀγαλλιώμενοι.

Instead of being shocked by suffering for righteousness sake, Peter wants the recipients to rejoice. If a believer is living a holy, just, and peaceable life—in imitation of Christ—then he or she will, by necessity, participate in Christ’s sufferings.

Christ opposed evil and violence in a counter-cultural way and this led to his suffering, rejection, arrest, abuse, and execution. Walking as Christ walks

virtually guarantees that a believer will come face-to-face the same powers that killed Jesus.

For that reason, Peter sees the suffering of ordinary believers as a special bond with Christ. It is a reason not for bitterness or despair but for joy (4:13)

It is important to note that when *suffering* (*thlipsis* 55 times; *paschō* 65 times) is mentioned in the NT, it pertains to

- Persecution as part of the believers conflict with the world (Rom. 8:18; 2 Thess. 1:5),
- Identification with the suffering of Christ (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13), and
- Developing Christian virtue of endurance (Rom. 5:3; 12:12).

In contrast, *illness* (*astheneō* 84 times) is something to be healed and is not view as something good for a person or something to rejoice about.¹²

In short, when illness or disease is mentioned, it is approached with prayed for healing. When suffering is mentioned, it refers to persecution and is to be endured and has positive blessings.

3. Condition: If you suffer for Christ (4:14-16)

¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.
¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker.
¹⁶ Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.

¹⁴ εἰ ὀνειδίξεσθε ἐν ὀνόματι Χριστοῦ, μακάριοι, ὅτι τὸ τῆς δόξης καὶ τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ πνεῦμα ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἀναπαύεται. ¹⁵ μὴ γὰρ τις ὑμῶν πασχέτω ὡς φονεὺς ἢ κλέπτης ἢ κακοποιὸς ἢ ὡς ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος. ¹⁶ εἰ δὲ ὡς Χριστιανός, μὴ αἰσχυνέσθω, δοξαζέτω δὲ τὸν θεὸν ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τούτῳ.

Here Peter encourages his readers to remain faithful to Christ—to suffer for just causes—but not to incur suffering because they have transgressed the law. That would be just suffering.

4. Foundation: We are responsible to God (4:17)

¹⁷ For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

¹⁷ ὅτι [ὁ] καιρὸς τοῦ ἄρξασθαι τὸ κρίμα ἀπὸ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ θεοῦ· εἰ δὲ πρῶτον ἀφ' ἡμῶν, τί τὸ τέλος τῶν ἀπειθούντων τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίῳ;

¹² See Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) excursus on suffering.

Now Peter returns to the foundation for Christian ethics. He began in verse 7 by mentioning The End, which includes the final judgment of God. Now he reminds the readers that they will someday have to answer to God for their behavior.

To say that the judgment begins with the household of God means that persecution is the beginning of the judgment. That is, the persecution and suffering of Christians purges his people, refines them, and prepares them for salvation so that they may fit for the final judgment.

E. Conclusions

Peter is writing to a suffering church, which is feeling persecuted by a culture hostile to Christ. Peter exhorts them to draw their ethics, not from *This Age*, but from the future *Age to Come*; not to live like contemporary culture, but to live like the Reign of God has already arrived.

As such, Peter gives four exhortations to his readers:

1. To exert **mental and moral discipline** to align with Christ *so that* they can pray!
2. To express **self-sacrificial love**, which reduces or eliminates strife, dissension, and violence.
3. To express **hospitality** because in doing so they witness to the inclusive Reign of God and welcome people like themselves, strangers and foreigners.
4. To **not be surprised** that they suffer as Christ suffered—unjustly and innocently as they confront evil perpetrated by other people.

If they follow these exhortations, Peter is convinced that his readers participate in the sufferings of Christ and that is cause for rejoicing.