

What Makes Suffering For Christ Unique?

February 15, 2015

It was July 19, 64 A.D., when the first spark that began the great fire of Ancient Rome was lit. This fire became one of the most famous in history. Rome was a city of narrow streets and close wooden apartments stacked one on top of the other. Since everything was close, the fire spread fast. It burned for six days and nights. When it was done only four of Rome's 14 districts escaped damage.¹ Two-thirds of the city was destroyed.²

In addition to the terrible fire, there were accounts that Nero, the ruler of Rome, simply watched the city burn. Some accounts claim he wouldn't issue orders to extinguish the flames to his soldiers. Other accounts claim that when people attempted to extinguish the flames, his soldiers stopped them. Other accounts tell of his soldiers setting additional fires in different parts of the city to frustrate those attempting to contain the blaze. No one knows for sure who started the fire but many historians believe Nero was behind the disaster.

Many of the people in the city lost everything. Some stood in front of the flames allowing the fire to consume them. They had already lost their possessions and their families so they despaired of life itself. Citizens of the city were angry. Someone needed to pay for this terrible disaster. Nero needed a scapegoat. Christians were the answer.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_Rome

² <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/great-fire-rome-background/1446/>

At the time, Christianity was spreading fast. It was a new and often misunderstood faith. Word on the street claimed Christians were cannibals. When they gathered they ate the flesh and drank the blood of a man named Jesus. Christians spoke of a final day of fiery judgment. For Nero, that was convenient. He claimed the Christians tried to bring about God's fiery judgment upon Rome by burning down the city.

Nero and the Romans had a place to vent their anger. Violent persecution broke out against the church as Nero used Christians as his scapegoat. Over time, Nero's practice of persecuting was codified into official Roman policy by Domitian, Trajan and other Roman emperors. The next 200 years were a period of horrible persecution against the church. Many times the justification for torture or death was nothing more than speaking the name of Christ and your own in the same sentence.

Tacitus, the Roman historian, gave us detailed reports of Nero's wrath. Nero rolled Christians in pitch, strapped them to poles and lit them on fire while still alive. They served as torches lighting his parties by night. He wrapped Christians in bloody animals skins and let his hunting dogs tear them to shreds. The historical list of atrocities against Christians that began with Nero and continued for the next 200 years boggles the mind and unsettles the stomach.

Why do we begin with these gruesome historical details? The book of 1 Peter was written as these 200 years of persecution began. It was a book that became a favorite for early Christians as they looked to it for hope in hard times.

The passage we are about to look at this morning was one of these early Christians' favorites. As we come to the end of this book, Peter talked about suffering one last time, except this time he focuses in on a particular type of suffering. Suffering for being a Christian.

Follow along in your copy of God's Word as we read our passage.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 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? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. 1 Peter 4:12–19 (ESV)

This passage gives us six lessons about suffering as a Christian. It shows us what makes suffering for Christ unique.

1. Suffering for Christ is expected.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 1 Peter 4:12 (ESV)

As Christians, expect to suffer simply because we utter the name of Jesus. Expect people will think we are a little different. Expect people will think we are weird simply because we love Jesus. Since Satan made a special target of Jesus, do not be surprised that as we become more like Jesus we experience a measure of the sufferings of Jesus.

Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. 1 John 3:13 (ESV)

Don't be surprised when you suffer as a Christian.

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” Luke 6:26 (ESV)

These are strong words. If you are popular and nobody has a problem with your faith, there may be a problem with your faith. Our lives should resemble Christ enough to draw fire. The people who were popular in the Old Testament were the false prophets. If you are always popular today, you are probably more like a false prophet than you are like Jesus.

If you are a high school student and you always fit in, there may be something wrong with your faith. Your life is too similar to the people of the world that nobody notices the Jesus inside of you. That is the reason you escape suffering.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

Don't you love Bible promises? You can take this one to the bank. If you are living a life that resembles Jesus, you will be persecuted. Guaranteed. If you never suffer, you need to ask yourself why nothing sets you apart.

Why do Christians who live godly lives always suffer? Living a god-honoring life in an ungodly world makes Christians an irritant to everyone's consciences. When you actually speak the name of Christ, you become particularly offensive. People start yelling, “Separation of church and state.” They tell you not to push your faith on other people. They tell you all beliefs about God are essentially the same, which is a major fail blog.

If you don't know God promises we will suffer for naming Christ in our work places, our schools and communities, you will be surprised when it happens.

If you were reared on the health, wealth and prosperity gospel where you were told Christ came to take away your problems and make you rich, you will be sorely disappointed when you start talking about Jesus and you lose your job. The Bible says don't be surprised when you suffer for Christ. It doesn't say you are guaranteed to be healthy, wealthy and popular because of Christ.

We may be rolled in pitch and lit on fire to burn like a campfire marshmallow. We may be torn to shreds by hunting dogs or we may simply lose the respect of our friends. Either way, we will suffer. Remember that Christianity doesn't promise immunity from suffering, it promises the experience of suffering. Don't be surprised.

2. Suffering for Christ is good for me.

Suffering for Christ purifies my faith.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 1 Peter 4:12 (ESV)

This suffering is described as a fiery trial. You may wonder why Peter called the suffering fiery? Peter was alluding to a verse in the Old Testament that many of his Jewish readers knew.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. Psalm 66:10 (ESV)

This verse reminds us that just as silver is melted down to burn away impurities or allow them to be scraped off the top, God brings trials into our lives

to be melted down. It is only after silver is melted in the furnace that it becomes pure. It is only after Christians are melted down that sin and junk in their lives burn away and they become pure.

As parents, we often pray that God will protect our kids from trials. God promises us that because he loves us and our children, he will put us and our children through trials, especially trials for naming the name of Jesus. God uses trials to purify our faith, to grow our faith, and to mature our faith. Trust me, nobody grows in Christ until they have to suffer for Christ. Paying a cost for our faith is actually a good thing. God loves us too much to give us lives of perpetual ease. Suffering is to be expected. Suffering for Christ is actually good for me.

Suffering proves my faith.

At the beginning of 1 Peter, Peter used the same term *fiery trials* that he used at the end of the book. It is as if fiery trials booked this entire letter.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6–7 (ESV)

Trials don't just purify our faith. They also prove the genuineness of our faith. When it gets tough to follow Christ, the phonies don't hang around.

Do you remember the parable of the soils that Jesus told in Luke 8 and Matthew 13? In the parable, a farmer scatters seed, which represents the Word of God. The seed landed on four different soils. One of the faulty soils the farmer scattered seed on was called rocky ground. Look what Jesus said about rocky ground.

And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. Luke 8:13 (ESV)

The word for testing in the Greek is the same word for trials. Trials and testing are one and the same. As soon as it gets tough to name the name of Jesus, phony Christians scatter like cockroaches when the lights go on.

Suffering for Christ purifies the church because phony Christians don't hang around when it costs them something to follow Jesus. Nobody in this room should be surprised when they suffer for simply being a Christian. When you suffer for being a Christian, remember, it is good for us. God will use my suffering for Christ to purify my faith. Suffering for Christ is also good for the church because all the phony Christians run for the door. If we never suffer for Jesus, chances are we are blending too far into our culture. God promises we will suffer when we are living for him.

3. Suffering for Christ carries a blessing.

Not only is suffering for Christ good for us but when we properly endure suffering for Christ it is the pathway to incredible amounts of blessing in our life. If you want to be seriously blessed by God there is no other way to get there other than suffering faithfully for the name of Christ.

There are two ways we experience that blessing. It comes to us in the future and it comes to us in the present.

Suffering for Christ carries a future blessing.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice (be super rejoiced) and be glad when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:13 (ESV)

Peter told us to rejoice when we start to suffer because our lives are like Christ. That is hard to imagine. When we suffer for being a Christian, it feels unfair. We live in a free country. We have freedom of religion. Why should we suffer because we act like Jesus?

If we live like Jesus, there will be times when we participate in a little of the sufferings of Jesus, even in a country with religious freedom. If we lived in a country that didn't have religious freedom, like Syria and Iraq, we will especially suffer for naming Jesus. How should we think about this?

It is a badge of honor to suffer because I am like Jesus.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Acts 5:41 (ESV)

When Peter and John were beaten because they were teaching in the name of Jesus, they consider it a privilege to suffer because of Jesus. Suffering because of Christ is a privilege. It is an honor.

Paul felt the same way.

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. Galatians 6:17 (ESV)

Paul pulled up his shirt to show people the scars from the beatings, whippings and stonings he took because he spoke about Jesus. One time he was beaten so badly, they left him for dead. Paul didn't complain about his beaten and scared body. His scars were badges of honor. It was a privilege to suffer because of the name of Jesus.

The world hates Jesus. The world couldn't get to Jesus. Paul was enough like Jesus that they beat him instead of Jesus. That was an honor. We

need to think of any suffering we take for the name of Christ the same way. The world still wants to kill Jesus. They can't get to him. When I live like Jesus, they will go after us because we are like him. That kind of suffering is a compliment. It is a privilege. Every scar on a Christian's body that was received because he named Christ is a badge of honor.

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake... Philippians 1:29 (ESV)

Peter told the Philippians their gift from God was not only that they would come to know Christ, but that they were privileged to suffer for Christ. It is a privilege to suffer for Jesus. Reframe your thinking.

The degree of my earthly suffering for Christ corresponds to the degree of my eternal joy with Christ.

...that you may also rejoice (be double rejoiced) and be glad when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:13 (ESV)

Let's look at this verse again. Not only is it a privilege to suffer because we are like Christ but when Christ returns, we will be rewarded because we suffered for the name of Christ. There is a play on the words in the Greek that is cloaked in the English. Peter said to rejoice when we suffer that we may rejoice *rejoice (be double rejoiced)* when his glory is revealed. Rejoice now in the privilege of being so much like Jesus that you suffer for Jesus. Be doubly rejoiced when Christ returns because the degree to which we are willing to suffer for Christ on earth will correspond to the degree of our joy in eternity. In fact we will doubly rejoice. It is a two for one deal. The degree which we suffer for Christ on earth will be doubly repaid by our eternal joy and reward in heaven.

Every one of us is a hedonist at heart. We are pleasure seekers. Some of the greatest pleasure we can have for all eternity are pleasures obtained while on earth that we purchased because we willingly suffered for the name of Jesus.

In Matthew 20, the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked that her sons would sit with Jesus in his glory, one on his right and the other on his left. Those are the positions of highest honor next to Jesus. What did Jesus say?

Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. [Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Matthew 20:22 \(ESV\)](#)

Jesus' point is the positions of greatest glory next to him are reserved for those who suffered immensely because they were like him. The degree of my earthly suffering for Christ corresponds to the degree of my eternal joy with Christ.

Paul taught the same thing.

...and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, [provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:17 \(ESV\)](#)

Our willingness to suffer like Christ will connect to the degree of our eternal glory and joy when we are with Christ.

How do we apply this? Live an aggressive Christian life. Be bold in your faith. Don't be afraid to talk about Jesus at work or with your friends, even if it is socially unacceptable. Don't be afraid to act like Jesus and talk about the good news of Jesus, even if you suffer because of it. You are gaining a great eternal reward. Expect to suffer for living like Christ and speaking about Christ. Just remember you will be doubly rewarded by Christ in the end.

Suffering for Christ carries an earthly blessing.

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 1 Peter 4:14 (ESV)

The blessings of suffering for the name of Christ are not all in eternity. God also promises to bless us in this life. Peter said when we are insulted for the name of Christ, we are blessed by God. Specifically this is talked about naming Jesus in a public forum. This is the football player in the NFL that spoke about Jesus on CNN so his interview was cut off midstream simply because he started talking about Jesus. This is Hobby Lobby going to court because they don't want to be forced by the government health care system to fund employee abortions. This is being thought weird because you are reading your Bible in study hall on your phone at school. This is quoting a Bible verse to explain your actions. When this happens, we are blessed.

What does the Bible mean when it says we are blessed? It doesn't mean we will become rich or wealthy. It doesn't mean life will become easy. The blessings God promises are that a special measure of the glory of God and the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives in those times of suffering. When you are suffering for Christ, you will know the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in an unprecedented way.

Some of us waddle along in life wondering if God is real. We do not have anything moments of great spiritual significance to reflect upon. I have a solution to move anyone out of that type of spiritual gridlock.

Take a public stand for Jesus. Be persecuted because you talk about Jesus at school or work. God promises he will send the presence and power of

the Holy Spirit into your life. The Holy Spirit will carry you through those times of suffering in a way you have never experienced. Maybe one of the reasons many of us don't experience Jesus' presence in a notable way is because we don't live our faith in a notable way.

Peter also said the Spirit of Glory rests on us in those moments when we are naming the name of Christ and suffering for it. The Spirit of Glory is the Shekinah Glory spoken about in the Old Testament. There are times in the Old Testament where God's presence so envelopes a place there is a cloud that literally glows with God's presence. At the dedication of Solomon's temple, the Shekinah Glory of God's presence showed up and filled the temple. The cloud that led the nation of Israel in the wilderness, which was a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, was a manifestation of the Shekinah Glory of God. Peter said when you are insulted for the name of Christ because you are living like Christ, in those moments, the Shekinah Glory of God's very presence will come to rest on you. That is a serious blessing.

I think the best illustration of this is Stephen in the New Testament. We find his story in Acts 6:8. He was boldly proclaiming Jesus. Wicked men were stirred up against him. They ultimately stoned him for naming the name of Jesus. As he was facing a life-or-death situation for naming Christ, the very presence of God's Shekinah Glory was indwelling him and shining through his face.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Acts 6:15 (ESV)

As Stephen was dying, look at the unprecedented intimacy with God through the Holy Spirit that he was privileged to know.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:55 (ESV)

When we suffer for naming the name of Christ it is different from other kinds of suffering. The same fullness of the Holy Spirit and the Shekinah Glory of God that was seen in Stephen's life as he suffered for Jesus is promised to rest on each one of us when we suffer for naming Jesus. If you read accounts of martyrs you find again and again incredible peace and courage in the face of death. Where does it come from? Right here!

We learned to expect to suffer when we act like Christ. We know suffering for Christ is good for us. It purifies our faith. It proves our faith. We know we are blessed in this life when we suffer for Christ and we are doubly blessed in eternity when it comes to our eternal rewards. These blessing are so appealing that Peter wants us to remember that not all suffering carries these blessings. It is only suffering because we are a Christian.

4. If I suffer, make sure it is for being a Christian.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 1 Peter 4:15–16 (ESV)

Peter gave us a quick list. Don't suffer as a murderer. Everyone can agree on that one. Don't suffer because you are a thief. Everyone said "Amen" to that. Don't suffer as an evildoer, that means don't suffer for carrying out any form of evil. That pretty much covers anything else that murder and thievery left off the list. Then he throws a curveball. Don't suffer as a meddler.

What is a meddler? This is the only time the word is used in the New Testament. It literally means looking over someone else's shoulder to see what

they are doing. Doesn't it annoy you when you are tapping out a text message on your phone and somebody strains their neck to read your text messages? My son told me this week that is called creeping. When you have a creeper you look back at them and tell them to, "Mind your own business." Peter was going from the really bad sins of murder and stealing to the very light sin of being a nosey busybody, of being a creeper. As a Christian, don't even suffer for creeping.

While the same word isn't used again in the Bible, the same thought comes up again and again.

...and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,,, 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (ESV)

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 2 Thessalonians 3:11 (ESV)

As Christians, don't even busy yourself reading the tabloids at the checkout aisle that discuss how Bruce Jenner is becoming a woman. Don't even repeat information about your friends that are getting a divorce. Don't be even be a creeper.

Peter's big point was to make sure that if you suffer *it is for nothing other than living like Christ and speaking about Christ*. These incredible promises and blessings are only guaranteed for Christ-like living. Not because you are suffering as a crook, a murderer or for acting rude and reading somebody else's text message.

At this point, some of Peter's audience was questioning their faith. When they came to Jesus they didn't realize that meant they were guaranteed to suffer.

They are beginning to wonder if the Christian life is worth their suffering. Maybe they should walk away from the faith.

5. Suffering for Christ now, is nothing compared to suffering for all of eternity later.

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? And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” 1 Peter 4:17–18 (ESV)

This verse is very important. It is often misunderstood. It makes a point that will reframe the way you think about suffering in the Christian life.

Peter said that in this last stage of God’s plan. God’s judgment is not just when Christ returns but it is until Christ returns. Right now God’s judgment has begun and it has begun with the household of God, the church. The judgment the church experiences is not a judgment to pay for their sin. Jesus already did that. God’s judgment upon the church is a purifying judgment to mature us and rid of us sin. It is also a proving judgment that proves the genuineness of our faith. It is a blessing judgment that results in greater eternal joy and greater earthly experience of God’s Holy Spirit.

God is intentionally purifying and proving his church by judging it. This is why God promises us trials and suffering in this life. Sometimes that purifying suffering is very hard. It is being torn to death by hunting dogs and rolled in pitch to burn like a torch in the night.

If this is what God’s purifying judgment is like for the church that he loves, imagine what will happen to those who don’t obey God and die apart from Christ and face God’s full wrath. That is mind-blowingly horrible.

The biblical picture is that everyone will suffer. Christians will suffer now, especially when they name Christ, but our suffering is good. It purifies us and ultimately blesses us. The only other option is to walk away from Christ and escape God's purifying judgment now but face his full wrath against sin for eternity later. That is the only other option. Everyone will suffer. I know this is hard to hear, but it is biblical.

Peter threw in a verse that is often misunderstood to support his point.

And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" 1 Peter 4:18 (ESV)

It sounds like our salvation is in question. That is not what Peter was teaching. Peter was quoting from Proverbs 11:31 in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, that all the Greek speaking people of Peter's day used. If you look up Proverbs 11:31 in your Bible, it will read a little differently because it was translated of the Hebrew.

If the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner! Proverbs 11:31 (ESV)

Notice the verse is comparing life of the righteous on earth with life of the ungodly and sinners in eternity. Now let's read the Greek translation from the Septuagint.

If indeed the righteous is *scarcely* saved, where will the ungodly and sinful appear? Proverbs 11:31 (LES)

The verse reads a little differently but it keeps the same idea. The key to understanding this verse is the word *scarcely*. *It means with great difficulty*. If the righteous are saved by going through great difficulties in this life — God's

purifying and proving judgment — what will become of the ungodly and the sinner in eternity?

The difficulty that is talked about in this verse is not the difficulty of being saved, it is the difficulty of suffering in this life faced by those who are saved. Peter showed us from the OT that the life of a Christians will be difficult. Take heart. That suffering will be used by God to purify our faith, to prove our faith and to bless our lives both now and in eternity.

6. When it is God's will that I suffer, trust my soul into God's hands and continue doing good.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. 1 Peter 4:19 (ESV)

Then Peter summed it up. When you suffer according to God's will, sometimes it is God's will that we suffer. Don't freak out. Don't be surprised. Expect to suffer. Know the suffering is good for us to purify and prove us. Know that God will use it to bless us in this life and in the next.

As you suffer, entrust your soul into God's care and continue to do good. Trust your soul into God's hands. He knows what he is doing when we are suffering. We just have to continue doing good and know that even our suffering is not out of his hands.



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