

Peter's Perspective on Persecution "His Resurrection Leads to our Crucifixion"

Passages: 1 Peter 1:1–9
John 15:18–21

Today, we start a new series of sermons studying the two letters of St. Peter. As you will soon see, the central focus of these letters is on suffering. But, Peter is not simply talking about the suffering of life in general...the suffering that might come with sickness, disease, or old age! Nor does Peter concern himself with the suffering that comes as the general result of evil in the world. No, the suffering that Peter concentrates his attention on is very specific—he speaks only about **the suffering that comes from being a Christian**...a Christian who lives out his/her faith before a non-believing world and gets hammered for it.

So, hang onto your seats! For this subject of Christian persecution will be our main focus for the next 8 weeks!

Let's pray.

Let me start by asking you one question: Why do you call yourself a Christian? Why do you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Back in my parents' day, in the post-war period of the 1950's, everybody in my neighbourhood seemed to identify themselves as Christians! Christianity was part of the culture...the social fabric of the nation. Everyone went to church. For them, being a Christian was as much a part of being an American as apple-pie and Chevrolets.

But when the late sixties came around, there was a noticeable change in American religious beliefs. The Vietnam War had brought a lot of disillusionment to the youth of America. Every main-stream institution was being questioned and challenged. Young people were dropping out of the church and, like me, seeking answers elsewhere. Those who stayed in the church started to turn their faith inwards. This meant that Christianity

became more and more personalised; something not to be talked about in public. It was seen as your private affair—to help you with your personal struggles, to give you guidance in your personal morality, and to renew you in your personal spiritual journey.

This, in fact, is the context in which we still find ourselves today. No one comes to church these days because it's the culturally "correct" thing to do. No one comes to church to be seen doing the right thing. You've personally made a decision—a deliberate and personal choice—to be here this morning. You have personal reasons. What's more, as our culture becomes more and more secular...and even aggressively opposed to Christianity... you have personally chosen to identify yourself with an increasingly alienated and ridiculed social minority! In fact, being here this morning is becoming an increasingly counter-cultural thing to do!

It's in this context that I ask this question again: Why do you call yourself a Christian? Why do you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ?

- Of course, if you were to say that you are a Christian because it gives you a personal relationship with the Triune God of the universe through the forgiveness of your sins, Peter would agree! In v2, Peter endorses the fact that those to whom he writes ***"...have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood."***
- And if you were to say that you're a Christian because you find personal comfort, encouragement and hope in the Spirit's 'new birth', Peter would also agree! In v3, Peter speaks about God's ***"great mercy"***, ***"new birth"*** and ***"living hope"*** that is now ours ***"through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"***.
- And if you were to say that the Christian faith satisfies you in your personal, spiritual journey and the future assurance of heaven, Peter would agree! In v4., Peter makes it clear that, through Christ's resurrection, we now have ***"an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade....kept in heaven for you"***.

- And if you were to say that your Christian experience is also one of God's daily love and protection, Peter would agree! In v5., Peter speaks about how God's power "**shields**" or protects us "**until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.**"

In other words, there are a great number of **eternal benefits**... "perks" if you like... that come to us in our connection with Christ and His resurrection. As believers, we have received all manner of **good things** from the fact that Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father! From His heavenly throne flows faith, hope, and love; power, peace, assurance, and joy! Indeed, the Apostle Paul goes so far as to say (in Ephesians 2) that "**we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places.**" Clearly, the benefits of being a Christian are many!

But, of course, Peter cannot stop with listing only the personal benefits of sharing in Christ's **resurrection**. He must also speak, and most profoundly, about the personal suffering that inevitably comes as we also share in Christ's **crucifixion**. After all, the two cannot be separated! And so, in verse 6 Peter writes: ***In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*** The grief that Peter is referring to, here, is, of course, the grief of persecution.

Now, at this early stage in Peter's letter, he doesn't give any details as to why these early Christians were being persecuted... so, let me give you a little of the **historical background**. You see, in Peter's day, Christianity was a minority religion. Even more than that, the dominant Roman culture considered Christianity to be a rebellious sect, one that stood in direct opposition to the polytheistic belief systems and immorality of Rome. It is difficult to exaggerate the seriousness of the situation that Christians found themselves in, for by becoming a Christian, you were doing two things: **First**, you were spurning the gods of Rome, thus inviting disaster upon yourself in the form of divine recriminations. **Secondly**, by inviting these divine recriminations onto yourself, you were putting your neighbours and local townsfolk into jeopardy! No one wanted to see you undermining the fabric of society by engaging in nonconformist behaviour! As

a result, you would be persecuted...forced to suffer... in the hope that you would renounce your silly minority faith and come back to the ways of the majority.

This is the reason why Peter begins his letter by referring to the recipients of his letter as “**strangers in the world**”? As a persecuted minority, these Christian believers felt the scorn of the larger population!

You are strangers in the world. You are scattered all over Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

Haven't you ever felt like this...like a stranger...amongst family, old school friends, work colleagues?...not sharing the interests or behaviour of those around you? If you have, then you will more easily appreciate Peter's words here! For it is in this atmosphere of alienation that he writes to his fellow believers in Christ-- people who, like us, often feel the pressure from neighbours, family and friends to give up Christ and conform to the ways of the majority culture! Indeed, to be a bit more accurate, Peter was writing to Christians who were living much like our Christian brothers and sisters in Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq live today-- Christians who constantly bear the ridicule, reproach and slander of their fellow townsfolk for calling themselves followers of Jesus Christ, living daily in the fear of reprisals and injustice! (Sadly, a great increase in persecution has come since the Iraq war, as Christianity is often incorrectly associated in Muslim minds with Western imperialism as well as Western decadence. Christianity is seen as both a foreign and a dangerous religion.)

A few weeks ago, I published the story of a Syrian believer named **Katia** in our newsletter. This is a snippet of her personal story of persecution: "The violence in Syria continues to increase and Christians are becoming a target of many extremists... A few years ago, we observed many of the same Christmas traditions that Christians in other parts of the world do. We would display our Christmas tree in the window, have a Christmas service on Christmas morning and would share the Christmas story with others on the street afterwards. This past year, if someone was fortunate enough to get a Christmas tree, they could not display it in the window of their home, as they knew it was not wise to bring attention to their household. Christians gathered together

for only a short amount of time for the Christmas service, to avoid large gatherings. Many Christians have fled Syria because of the violence, but there are many who have remained, as they feel God has called them to stay for such a time as this."

This is the voice of the persecuted church; the voice of those who, because they call themselves Christians, suffer the pain of constant rejection and misunderstanding by the surrounding culture!

This is exactly what Peter is talking about in his letter! Indeed, Peter is attempting to make it clear to his readers that, if they bear the name of Christ, sharing in the living hope of His **resurrection**, they must also share in the pain of His **crucifixion**! In other words, resurrection and crucifixion always go together! They cannot be separated!

Why is that? The answer is found in the very nature of God—the God who became a man in Jesus Christ! You see, the God who came from heaven lived like a stranger in the midst of his own people, Israel. At one point, He even made it clear to a would-be disciple that, **“The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head!”** His life embodied the words of Isaiah’s prophecy: **“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrow and acquainted with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed Him not.”** And what was the reason for this rejection? Why did the Son of man have nowhere to lay His head? **Just look at His lifestyle!** He was rejected because He lived in a way that was essentially **counter-cultural!**

- He refused to share in the cultural power plays and politics of His peers.
- He didn’t join in their denigrating attitude to women and foreigners.
- He touched lepers and hung out with those rejected by society.
- He exposed the exploitative activities of those who tried to gain personal gain and advantage over others.

And although it was this **counter-cultural** approach to life that won Him many followers, it was also what caused Him a great deal of grief and finally cost Him His life... by crucifixion! Of course, the story doesn’t end there! Three days later, Jesus was

raised from the dead! In other words, crucifixion was followed by Resurrection!

This is Peter's focus...but in reverse! In his mind, to be a Christian is to share, not only in the joy of His resurrection but in the sorrow of His crucifixion. According to Peter, it's clear that you can't have one without the other!

And if you think that Peter's perspective on persecution was extreme, you'll find this same perspective mirrored in St. Paul. Listen to some more of what Paul said:

- (Romans 6:5) **"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."**
- (Gal. 2:20–21) **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."**
- (Phil. 3:10–11) **"I want to know Christ and power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."**
- (2 Tim. 2:11) **Here is a trustworthy saying: "If we died with him,
we will also live with him."**
- (2 Tim. 3:12) **"All who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."**

The point is that, as Christians, we are called to live in the way of the cross. And when we suffer persecution, we share in the sufferings of the One who "so loved the world" that He gave Himself over to humanity's ridicule, scorn and abuse. With Jesus, we turn the other cheek. With Jesus, we carry humanity's burdens the extra mile. In the same way that **He** loved without exception and without retaliation, so too must **we!**

Rod Burton writes, "Is it realistic to imagine that a journey into the heart of God will not involve significant experiences of pain? The one who willingly undertook the kenosis of the incarnation, who

loved us even to death, and whose suffering body is manifest throughout this world, cannot be apathetic.”

So let’s stop for a minute and go back to my opening question: Why do you call yourself a Christian? Why do you identify yourself as a follower of Christ? Do you do it simply to share in the glory of His resurrection, or are you willing to also share in the suffering of His crucifixion...a crucifixion that comes from living in a counter-cultural way, with eyes fixed on Jesus!? Back in the 1970’s, Francis Shaeffer prophetically wrote the following words: “The church is going to be squeezed in a wringer. If we found it tough these last few years, what are we going to do when we are faced with the real changes that are ahead?...We must teach our young people to be revolutionaries; revolutionaries against the status quo.” (We’ll talk much more about this idea in the weeks to come!)

Let’s finish this first sermon by taking a look at verses 7 to 9. You see, in verse 7, Peter has some good news for all those who follow Christ in the way of His cross.

⁷ These (trials) have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter sees God as a metalworker, putting His people through the flames of suffering in order to make our character more pure and Christ-like. In God’s sovereignty, suffering can become a positive refinement process, burning out the dross of sin. This metaphor, of course, was not a new for Peter--he would have read it in several Old Testament passages referring to the refinement of Israel through the persecution of invading armies.

- Psalm 66:10-- “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.”
- Isaiah 48:8-11—“**See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.**
- Zechariah 13:7-9 -- “I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'”

These OT passages considered Israel's invasion and overthrow by foreign armies as a positive thing, out of which a **new, cleansed, people of God** would emerge—a remnant people who would really know him! Of course, as we come into the New Testament, we realise that Jesus fulfils this Suffering Servant role for Israel in His own life of personal rejection and suffering..., and ultimately in His crucifixion. Unlike Israel, He was humbly obedient, willing to be refined by His Father into pure gold. Hebrews 5 says it this way:

⁸ Though he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Although Jesus was sinless, He was perfected even further through suffering! And now, **it's His church's turn** to engage in this same refinement process! It's the servant's turn to be misunderstood and hated, just as the master once was! It's the servant's turn to feel the Refiner's fire...to feel what the Master once felt. As Jesus said, **"No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you!"** Jesus called His people, the church, to take up their cross and follow Him in His counter-cultural lifestyle...to lay down their lives for the sake of the world in an uncompromising love that, like His, will be misunderstood and rejected. And even though we join Him in His exile, becoming strangers in this world, at the same time we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that our crucifixion will turn to resurrection one day soon!

Friends, although we have only just begun to dip into Peter's letters, this one truth will repeat itself throughout them both—As Christians, we identify with Christ not only in the benefits of His resurrection but also in the pain of His crucifixion. The two must always go together!

This is exactly where Peter places His final focus:

⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Let's pray.