

# 1 Peter 4:12-19

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*12 Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you.*

*13 Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.*

*14 So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you.*

*15 If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs.*

*16 But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!*

*17 For the time has come for judgement, and it must begin with God's household. And if judgement begins with us, what terrible fate awaits those who have never obeyed God's Good News?*

*18 And also, "If the righteous are barely saved, what will happen to godless sinners?"*

*19 So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you.*

## **The Context of this Passage:**

This passage marks the beginning of the third and final section of Peter's letter and Peter starts this section by telling the Christians scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia that should not be surprised by the persecutions and fiery trails they were suffering. In fact as we look through 1 Peter as a whole we see that suffering is a common thread throughout this book. We see suffering mentioned in 1:6, 2:20, 3:14, here and in 5:10. Based on this it was clear that the Christians in this area were suffering severe trials. We don't know of any official persecution of the Christians in this area at the time this letter was written so most likely this persecution was coming from the general populace, probably aided in part by the local governing authorities.

The Christians in this area were mostly from Gentile backgrounds and as such they would not have been used to persecution as a result of their religion. Rome and the Roman officials generally didn't care about what religion anyone belonged to provided they were loyal to Caesar. The Jews generally were tolerated despite their adherence to the worship of just one God. So it is quite likely that many of these new Christians would have been expecting suffering as one of the results of becoming a Christian and in fact quite probably saw it as something strange and in contradiction of the promised blessings of the gospel.

## **Be Thankful in Suffering:**

However, Peter tells them not to be surprised at the fiery trials they were going through, as if something strange were happening to them. Instead he tells them to be glad, or as some translations have it, joyful, when they suffer. And in fact the word glad or joyful there is in the present tense – they were to be and continue to be glad. And why? Because Peter tells them that their suffering for Christ makes them partners with him in his suffering. This is not something to be ashamed of, but rather something to rejoice in. And that is true for us too. If we suffer for being a Christian we too should rejoice. And if we suffer for our Christianity it is a mark that we are genuine (remember Jesus words about the divided house) and so we will have the wonderful joy of seeing Christ and his glory when it is revealed to all the world. That day will not bring fear and trembling to us as it will to those who do not believe but rather joy, joy because we will see Christ face to face, joy because it



means the days of our suffering are over, joy because the peace of heaven awaits us.

For some Christians this is their reality. They live in countries where being a Christian can result in your being beaten, tortured and even executed. The Open Doors website for example has a list of the top 50 countries where Christians are persecuted. Notice that that is the top 50, the actual number is greater. But we live in New Zealand, so how much relevance does this have to us? I would suggest more than we realise.

These stats are from 2006 Census:

(<http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity/religious-affiliation.aspx>)

- The number and proportion of people indicating that they had no religion continued to increase in the 2006 Census. In 2006, 1,297,104 people (34.7 percent) stated that they had no religion, compared with 1,028,052 people (29.6 percent) in the 2001 Census.
- Younger people were more likely to be recorded as having no religion. Over 4 in 10 (43.0 percent) children (aged 0 to 14 years) were recorded as having no religion, compared with over 1 in 10 (11.8 percent) people aged 65 years and over.
- The European and New Zealander ethnic groups had the highest proportions of people stating that they had no religion, at 37.7 percent (955,260 people) and 37.6 percent (155,268 people), respectively. People in the Middle Eastern, Latin American and African ethnic grouping were least likely to state that they had no religion, with 11.0 percent or 3,651 people in this group giving this response in the 2006 Census.

Unfortunately I couldn't find more up to date figures but I think it paints a fairly clear picture that a large proportion of people, particularly younger people, view Christianity, or for that matter, any religion, as irrelevant to their lives. Which means that other philosophies, the religions without deities, like materialism, are gaining ground. Increasingly we live and work in a society that views religion, and particularly Christianity, as at best quaint and at worse dangerous in case we are like the “fundamentalists” of the Southern USA who are “obviously” bigots with very little intelligence. And the use of religion and particularly Christianity, as a tool in the politics of the USA and it's increasingly authoritarian leanings are not helping the average persons world view of Christianity either.

So given all this and looking at these figures purely from a human perspective I think it is fairly safe to say that we can probably expect persecution of Christians, even if at a vocal level, to increase in New Zealand. So is this passage relevant to us? Yes. Remember, the world persecuted and kill our Lord Jesus Christ. And as Jesus said:

*If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first .. Do you remember what I told you? A slave is not greater than the master. Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. (John 15:18, 20)*

And remember, if you are suffering for doing good, for living the way that you do, for being a Christian, then it's far more of a reflection on the nature of the person doing the persecution than it is a reflection on you.

### **Provided Of Course You Are Suffering For The Right Reasons...:**

However, just because we are suffering as a Christian doesn't by default mean that we are being purified by God. We may be suffering because of our own sinfulness. Peter mentions four different



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things in this category. The first three are murdering and stealing and making trouble and I think we would all immediately agree that if you are suffering because of those then that is not suffering for Christ but rather just suffering for the normal natural reasons people suffer for doing those things.

Actually for the Christian suffering because of something they have done wrong like that should make it doubly worse. There should be the shame of having done something wrong and the shame of having disappointed our Lord and Saviour. God calls us to live holy lives and if by doing something wrong we disgrace his name that should be doubly hurtful to us. It cost him his life to redeem us.

The fourth thing Peter mentions is prying into other peoples affairs. This is much more difficult. One man's prying is another's helping. This is where motives play a huge role and not just the motives we think are the reason we are doing it but our real motives. This is where we need to ask ourselves questions like:

1. Am I actually trying to help or do I just know better?
2. Am I just gossiping or am I trying to really help?
3. Am I trying to do the right thing or I am just trying to get my own way or just trying to get one up on the person?

These sorts of questions are often a lot more tricky to figure out. What do I mean by that?

### **So What Are Your Real Motives?**

We are very good at lying to ourselves, this is part of inherent sinfulness. We will justify our actions for exactly the same things that we will condemn in other people. That should ring true for you. If it doesn't then I would recommend that you serious look at you life because this is one of the more basic ways that sin has twisted our lives.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7?

*1 "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. 2 For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. 3 "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4 How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)*

It is always much easier to judge someone else than to judge ourselves. This can be very subtle. We poke our nose into someone else's business because it is the "right" thing to do – or at least that is what we tell ourselves anyway. Then when they turn on us we see ourselves as the martyr, suffering for being a Christian, when in reality it has nothing to do with our Christianity and far more to do with our own sinfulness. I very much doubt that there is a single person here who doesn't know what I'm talking about. But we tend to "forget" those incidents. It reflects badly on us and bruises our egos.

The other side of this is that we judge other peoples motives by what we think their motives are, not necessarily what their actual motives are. Something happens and we think we know what the other person is thinking, why they are doing something, so our view of them is coloured by what our perceptions are, not the reality.

### **The Issue of Judgement:**

Now we get to the hard part of this passage – the bit that we read and then skip over because it's easier than actually having to deal with what it implies.



*17 For the time has come for judgement, and it must begin with God's household. And if judgement begins with us, what terrible fate awaits those who have never obeyed God's Good News?  
18 And also, "If the righteous are barely saved, what will happen to godless sinners?"*

When we read something like this how does it make us feel as Christians?

## WHITEBOARD

The reality is that as much as we may not like it, God is not only a God of love and a God of mercy, he is also the righteous Judge who hates sin and will punish it. We see this balance clearly in the Old Testament with both the nation of Israel and the surrounding nations. God would show a nation mercy until their sins rose too high, then God would step in and punish them. This was true also of his own people. In fact often judgement came against Israel first as they should have known better and only afterwards were the other nations punished. Again and again we see God's anger burning against Israel for rejecting Him and worshipping idols. And again and again we see His mercy rescuing them. And even the people who were not His people were shown mercy – Ninevah in the book of Jonah is the classic example. The nations that were punished were not just punished for no rime or reason either. For example, in Genesis 15 we read

*12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. 14 But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. 15 (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) 16 After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction." (Genesis 15:12-16)*

The Amorites were given more than 400 years to repent of their evil ways. And we must not think that Jesus is different in this regard. In Revelation 19 we read this about Jesus:

*11 Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True, for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war. 12 His eyes were like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. A name was written on him that no one understood except himself. 13 He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. 14 The armies of heaven, dressed in the finest of pure white linen, followed him on white horses. 15 From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. He will release the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty, like juice flowing from a wine press. 16 On his robe at his thigh was written this title: King of all kings and Lord of all lords. (Revelation 19:11-16)*

The language may be poetic but the intent is clear – God is still God. We are not alone in our dislike of judgement though – we live in a society when the ideas of God as judge are not liked, particularly the “Old Testament God”. Richard Dawkins, the eminent biologist who wrote *The God Delusion* has this to say about the God of the Old Testament:

*"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." (page 51)*



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And so we put away sin and judgement and talk about love and mercy as that is less likely to offend. But the reality is that by doing so we only preach half a God. God does hate sin. He will punish it in both in his people and in those who are not his people. There is a final judgement coming when all men, whether Christian or not, will be judged and for those who do not know Christ that will indeed be a day of terror. We are saved by God's grace but that does not mean that we will not face judgement. 1 Corinthians 3 has this to say:

*12 Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. 13 But on the judgement day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. 14 If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. 15 But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)*

Sobering words. And we do need to remember that what we do has its consequences – our works will be judged. God had to continually bring Israel back into line and he does the same for us. If we worshipping other gods, like the gods of materialism, then God will discipline us to bring us back to himself. Hebrews has this to say:

*5 And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, "My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. 6 For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child." 7 As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? 8 If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. (Hebrews 12:5-8)*

But Peter does not leave us with judgement and neither should we for he writes:

*So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you.*

That should encourage us even if we are not being persecuted. God is faithful. That is the message of the entire Bible and he will never fail you. He created you, he redeemed you and he is the one that ensure you that you are brought to heaven, independent of what the world throws at you. Praise be to God.

## **Conclusion:**

So in summary:

1. We should not be surprised when suffering comes. If we are really living for Christ then we will be different and as such should expect everything from mockery and discrimination through to actual physical persecution.
2. Suffering has its purpose in our lives. It's not random. God is in control. In suffering our faith is purified and our fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ is deepened.
3. If we suffer for being a Christian then we can be confident of enjoying the glory of this return. This alone should give us reason to be joyful in our sufferings.
4. We need to commit ourselves to doing right when we face suffering. The way we respond to those who persecute us is a powerful witness to what we believe. The 2nd-century Church Father Tertullian wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church,"

