

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” ¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

In the name of Jesus our Savior, dear friends,

You don’t have to be a football fan to have heard of Colin Kaepernick. Lately, he’s been in the news and all over sports talk shows, written about in blogs and his image found in memes of every kind. The president of the United States was in important meetings in China and even he (and even there!) was asked about the NFL quarterback’s actions! All the uproar is over the stand he has taken. He has vowed NOT to stand during the playing of the National Anthem before every game. You can debate whether his actions have harmed or helped the discussion of social issues, but there’s no debate about this: he took an action and while some people admire him for it, he is taking a lot of heat from a lot of people over it.

Over the course of the last couple thousand years, many people have taken a stand on something infinitely more important—faith in Jesus Christ. While it is extremely interesting, we don’t have time to review the history of persecution over the last 2,000 years, but let me just share a couple examples.

From Acts chapter 8: **On that day** (the day the Jews stoned Stephen to death) **a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. (v. 1-3)**

Things only escalated from there. The Roman historian Tacitus records this about the Roman persecution of Christians that began soon after that, during the days of the Apostle Paul: *...hundreds of Christians were arrested, convicted for antisocial beliefs, covered in the skins of wild animals, and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, coated with pitch, and set on fire, so when darkness fell, they burned like torches in the night. Later in Rome, Christians were beheaded, burned at the stake, and thrown to the beasts.*

Around 300 A.D. *the emperor Diocletian... ordered the destruction of all Christian churches, the dissolution of all congregations, the confiscation of all Christian property, the exclusion of Christians from public office, and death to any Christian caught in public assembly...He ordered all provincial governors to seek out every Christian and use any method to compel appeasement of the gods.*

When Diocletian suddenly resigned, his partners Maximian and Galerius carried out his edict with ferocious zeal. There were many martyrs in every province. Christians were killed in every conceivable way. For eight years the terror raged; perhaps 1,500 people were killed and many times that number tortured.¹

Through the centuries, persecution of Christians was carried out all over the world—Japan, China, Russia, the Middle East...and it continues in many places to this day.

It is difficult to imagine the threat of death for Christians being common in the United States, but we don't know what the future holds. So today as we talk about persecutions that we endure, we're thinking of persecution in other forms. The Apostle Peter wrote the words we're looking at this morning and he gives us the answer to the question:

What Do I Do When Bad Things Happen?

Before we look at Peter's encouragement to us, let's be clear about something. He's not addressing bad things that happen just because bad things happen in a sinful world—accidents, disease, random violence and things like that. Nor is he talking about trouble we bring on ourselves because we do dumb things or take unnecessary risks or don't know when to shut our mouths and things like that. Peter wrote: **If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.** He's talking about actually suffering because you are a Christian. You can't miss that in his words as he speaks of **"participating in the sufferings of Christ,"** of being **"insulted because of the name of Christ,"** of **"suffering as a Christian."** Does this ever happen to you?

Certainly Christian students are confronted with this. Every year it happens that certain professors insist that the Bible is not trustworthy. They make Christians feel dumb for being Christians. Students are told that the version of science being taught is to be believed and the things you hear in church are not. Christian students who are honest in their responses, presentations and tests may suffer for it.

Staying on campus for a minute, consider the pressure to misuse alcohol. You're not 21. Christian faith trusts God's wise and protective command to obey the government. You don't participate and then you're made fun of and you're not invited to do things with certain people later. Relationships suffer or go away entirely.

The same painful thing happens when Christian young people resist the temptation to compromise God's protective commands regarding sexuality. You want to live as God's child, you do the right thing in his eyes, and rejection by others is what you get for your faithfulness to God.

¹ Jeske, M. A. (2002). *James, Peter, John, Jude* (p. 122). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House.

But persecution is not just a young person problem. Your kid is a pretty good soccer player or volleyball player...club team expectations include being gone every weekend. That means no church for months. You explain that to the other parents and tell them your child won't play and they never look at you the same. Some pile on guilt for "holding your child back." It hurts to think that maybe you're not a good parent and to have other parents look at you that way.

The workplace presents issues for Christians too. In many environments, we are not allowed to express our personal faith in Jesus. But for Christians, talk about God and the Bible and faith comes so naturally! Anything from dirty looks to avoidance to loss of a job can follow.

Peter writes about **the painful trial you are suffering** because of your faith in Christ. It comes in many forms and those are just a few example. If we actually live our faith, these things come to us. So **What Do We Do When Bad Things Happen** to us because we follow Jesus?

1. Don't Be Surprised

Well, the first thing he says is, **"Don't be surprised."** Why would we think that this is unusual or unexpected? We can walk back through the centuries and see that this has always happened! It seems that people who are actually trying their best to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Savior, should expect that the path they travel on is going to be different from that of many people around them who do not trust in Jesus and do not understand the love and protection God gives to us in the commands he gives us to live by! As you walk around on campus, what do you expect to find? There will be many who do not share your faith in God. Your life will look different than theirs and many of those will not respond well to you. This should not shock you! It's the same thing in your neighborhood and where you work and in organizations that you're part of. Why would you and I expect something else?

2. Rejoice

Okay, so we shouldn't be surprised, but Peter tells us to **rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ!** This is harder. This requires us to stop and think about what's going on, doesn't it? So often, we get smacked in the face with an unkind word, a dirty look, an action that hurts us deeply. And our reaction? Our feelings are hurt, we roll the events around in our mind, we're sad, we might get angry with the person. We may even sin against God as we respond in a wrong way—lashing out at the person. It also happens that we abandon the good thing we were doing and change our behavior, doing things that are unacceptable to God so that we are accepted by people. It happens so quickly and so easily, but God calls us to something very different.

He says, "rejoice." **Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ!** And shouldn't we rejoice that we are allowed to "bear our cross" for Christ—the Son of God who bore the guilt and punishment of our sins on an *actual* cross? You know, Peter and the other apostles actually give us a good example of how we ought to do that. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, they were jailed and threatened with death by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Ultimately, this

is what happened: **They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. (Acts 5:40-41).** It is possible for us to rejoice that we suffer for the sake of Jesus.

This faith-filled response to suffering looks ahead to an even greater joy. Peter says to rejoice...**so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.** There will come a day when the painful trials and suffering for Christ comes to an end and we will be with him in heaven.

3. Don't Be Ashamed but Praise God

However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. Though it may appear shameful to sinful people, there is no shame in suffering for being a Christian. It ought to make us grateful that God has called us to be his people at all. Because of our sin, we were not worthy of God calling us to faith. But he has! Suffering for Christ then, is a very small thing in comparison. It ought to bring praise from our lips to the God who has made us his people and marked us with the name of Christ!

4. Commit Yourself to God

Giving praise to God when we suffer for Christ reminds us that this is not simply about how we *think* or how we *feel* when persecuted for our faith. There is a response. And that response includes this encouragement: **So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.** That sounds like trust, doesn't it? **Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.**

There is something to be learned from the Greek word Peter used here that ends up as "commit" in our Bible. It means "to make a deposit." It's like taking something valuable and depositing it into safe hands. This is exactly what we do with our bodies and souls, isn't it? We trust God with our very selves—here in this world where we suffer for his name and for eternity where no such trouble will hound us. Committing ourselves to God is trusting the One who created us, who saved us from sin and eternal death by his Son, and by his Holy Spirit instilled us with faith to trust in Jesus. When you consider the love of God shown to you, the suffering seems as it is—temporary and not on the same scale as the blessings of God.

5. Continue to Do Good (in God's eyes)

Peter's then says: **So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator...and continue to do good.** So when we suffer, not only do we praise God and commit ourselves to him and avoid sinful reactions, we are to *continue to do good!* Though we are suffering, we do the things that are good for other people—bodily, emotionally, and spiritually.

Why would God ask that? Consider how that looks to others! Think about the witness that is! If we go back to Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem real quick, we hear this after their imprisonment, flogging and release: **Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ**

(Acts 5:42). What a wonderful reaction! What love for people that they continued to do what was good for people's souls!

Of course, the best example is Jesus himself—his life and death was the definition of suffering for doing good, wasn't it? He came into this world to do the best thing that could ever be done—pay for the sins of every human being so that there could be eternal life. Despite his love that cared about the simplest thing like embarrassment for a young wedding couple who might run out of wine for their guests, he suffered at the hands of people. Despite his concern for a widow whose child had died and people whom demons possessed, he was disliked and harassed. Despite a hope for the repentance of Israel's religious leaders that went down to the last hours of his life, he was falsely accused and tortured and killed in an embarrassing and cruel way.

And then the risen Christ continued to love and do good for the world by sending out his disciples to share the message of sins forgiven and eternal life by faith in him. He is our Savior—the one we run to when we stumble in our faith during persecution and the one who does indeed forgive those sins of ours. And he is the perfect example to follow when we find ourselves enduring difficulties that come as a result of our trust in him.

Peter intends to bring us comfort when he says: **For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"** All people must pass under the microscope which the holy God looks into. He is the judge of all. Fortunately, though we are sinners, God will see the sin cleared away by faith in Jesus and find Christians fit to live in heaven eternally. But those who reject God and harass his people in this world, will not survive the scrutiny of the Almighty. He tells us that not so that we can gloat over their demise, but to assure us that we can bear up under persecution at their hands and know that God will sort things out in the end.

We can accept that bad things will sometimes happen because of our faith in Christ. We now know how we are to handle those situations so that we please the God who has saved us. And we can look forward with certainty to eternal life in heaven where we will be free of harassment and oppression and where we will be with God. Until that day comes, may the Holy Spirit continue to strengthen our faith so that we can be bold witnesses for our Savior in this world—no matter what that might bring. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.