

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
November 15, 2009

A Suffering People

1 Peter 4:12-19

Key verse: “Let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good” (1 Peter 4:19).

Often, our first response when reading in 1 Peter about suffering is to relate the topic to things that commonly touch our lives, such as *illness, grief, or financial setbacks*. This particular passage, however, refers specifically to suffering that comes to the Christian as a result of *who he is* or *what he does* for Christ. In other words, this passage is about being persecuted for one’s faith in Christ.

The reason why we tend to apply 1 Peter’s teaching to problems other than persecution may be that, in this country, we know little about being violently persecuted for our faith. However, let’s not forget two important facts: **1.** Many Christians around the world are being persecuted for their faith, often in oppressive and violent ways. **2.** Every Christian who sincerely follows Christ will face some form of *opposition, criticism, misunderstanding, or ridicule*. “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

So, with these two facts in mind, let’s take a look at what 1 Peter 4:12-19 says to us about persecution....

The Christian should not be surprised by the fact that he faces persecution (v. 12). Robert Mounce observed: “The high standards of Christianity made society uneasy. By aspiring to the teaching of Christ, believers had inadvertently become the conscience of society. Mankind has always been troubled by its conscience, and persecution has been the normal response.” (*A Living Hope*, Eerdman’s)

The purpose of persecution often is to prove the reality of our Christian commitment. Verse 12 speaks of the “fiery trial” of persecution taking place “to test you.”

The Christian should face persecution with rejoicing. The persecuted believer is to rejoice for these two reasons: **1.** *Christ will give eternal reward to the believer who is faithful when persecuted* (v. 13). **2.** *God’s Spirit rests now on those who endure opposition for the sake of Christ* (v. 14).

Verses 15 and 16 point out that *suffering for doing evil (e.g., murder, thievery, or other crimes) does not qualify as suffering for Christ!* This point reminds me of

the bungling criminals I heard about. If you ever decide to turn to crime, I hope you are better at it than these guys:

In Missouri, a guy trying to pawn a stolen bracelet was arrested when the pawn shop owner recognized the bracelet—it was his wife's!

In West Virginia, a knife-wielding mugger accepted a \$300 check from his victim. The thief was arrested the next day trying to cash the check at a local bank.

In Tennessee, a burglar realized he'd left his Nikes at the home he had just robbed. So, he returned there and asked the lady of the house if she had seen his shoes. Not surprisingly, she called the cops, and the brilliant thief was arrested!

(from Campus Life magazine)

So, our text makes it clear that this passage on persecution is for those who suffer “as a Christian” (v. 16), not those who suffer for their own evil deeds.

Verses 17-18 teach that another purpose of persecution is “preparatory judgment”: This is a difficult part of the passage, but it seems to refer to the cleansing, refining effect that suffering and persecution have on believers. God can use persecution as a refining fire that purifies us, prepares us for our heavenly home, and “judges” anything in us that needs to be left behind before we go there.

Thomas a Kempis wrote: “It is good that we at times endure opposition, and that we are evilly and untruly judged, when our actions and intentions are good. Often such experiences promote humility, and protect us from vainglory. For then, we seek God’s witness in the heart.” (from *The Imitation of Christ*)

Finally, verse 19 reminds us of two things the persecuted believer should do:
1. Place his life in God’s hands, assured that God can be trusted through every “fiery trial”
2. Keep on living for Jesus, “continuing to do good.”

This passage on persecution may seem foreign to us who live in this land of religious freedom. But let us take to heart the Biblical truth that every Christian who sincerely follows after Christ will, at times, face some form of opposition, criticism, misunderstanding, or ridicule. When it happens to you, remember these lessons from 1 Peter 4.

Also, let’s never forget our brothers and sisters who, by the thousands, are being violently persecuted for their faith in Christ.

On March 15, 2004, Christian missionary Karen Watson was killed in Iraq, along with four other missionaries. Several media outlets reported a letter that Karen had written from Iraq to her American pastors, a letter that was read at Karen’s funeral. It included the following words:

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death.

When God calls, there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, His glory my reward....

The Missionary Heart:

Care more than some think is wise.

Risk more than some think is safe.

Dream more than some think is practical.

Expect more than some think is possible.

I was called not to comfort or success, but to obedience....There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him. I love you two and my church family.

In His care,

Karen

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)