

**SUFFERING WITH JESUS****1 PETER 4:12 – 14; 5:6 – 11***by Elaine Poproski*

When Peter wrote this letter, he was writing to Christians spread among the Roman colonies in northern Turkey. These were probably people who had been living in Rome until the emperor got frustrated by all the trouble caused by the Jews in that great city and decided to throw them out.<sup>i</sup> It's important to remember that there wasn't really such a thing as 'Christians' yet. There were Jews who followed Jesus and Jews who didn't. (And there were Gentiles – non-Jews – who had also decided to follow Jesus, but they don't seem to have been thrown out with the Jews.) So when the emperor decided to kick the Jews out of Rome, it didn't matter if they followed Jesus or not. They all got kicked out together. And a bunch of them settled, at least for a time, in the Roman colonies in what is, today, northern Turkey.

The world these Christians lived in was so different from our own, it's nearly impossible for us to put ourselves in their shoes. We live in a country that was shaped by the Judeo-Christian ethic. When Canada was colonized by England and France, Christianity was a major force behind both countries. While we can easily argue that the many horrors of colonization were completely opposed to Jesus' way and thus can't really be called Christian, we also can't deny that our way of life in Canada continues to evidence that Christian history. Back when this church was built, and for a long time after, if you didn't attend church on Sundays and you tried to run your own business, you'd almost certainly fail. If you wanted to advance in a company or you wanted to run for office in any level of government, you had to be a church goer. It was only 35 years ago that Ontario schools stopped saying the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of the school day. It wasn't until 1992 that Ontarians were allowed to shop on Sundays. In the entire history of Canada since it was colonized by England and France, no other religion has ever been as privileged as Christians have been. Even still today, Christmas and Good Friday are national holidays. In Ontario, the Catholic School system is publicly funded right alongside the public school system. As of the 2021 census, Christians still make up more than half of the Canadian population and almost half of Toronto's population.<sup>ii</sup> No other single religion comes close. In a lot of ways, it's easy to be a Christian in Canada and not stand out even a little bit.

The same was not the case for those Peter was writing to. Those Christians were the minority. And they weren't a big minority. They had no power and no influence. They had no special rights or freedoms of religion. They had no representation in government. Being a Christian excluded them from society in a number of ways. Christian values weren't just different from the majority culture's values, they were often directly opposed to them. To live as a Christian meant getting noticed. And often the consequences of that notice included suffering of some sort.

Peter wrote this letter to encourage these Christians. He wrote it to remind them of the larger context – the kingdom of God context – within which they were living. But we aren't living lives like they lived. We mostly don't face any hardship for being a Christian. So what does Peter have to say to us?

The first thing, I think, Peter has to say to us, is to remember the millions of Christians around the world who are persecuted, and to pray for them. They are, after all, our brothers and sisters.

*Open Doors* is a well-respected organization that's been involved in supporting persecuted Christians around the world since the mid-1950s. One of the things they do is create an annual ranking of the top 50 countries in which Christians face the most extreme persecution. They estimate that more than 360 million Christians around the world suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.<sup>iii</sup> Check out this short video.

Play [video](#).

How many of us would attend church services if doing so could get us sent to a labour camp or executed, like happens in North Korea? How many of us would challenge an authoritarian regime, if doing so meant getting arrested and imprisoned, likely without a fair trial, like is happening in Nicaragua? How many of us would admit to anyone that we're a Christian, if doing so might result in unemployment and unemployability, like those living in Iraq and Syria?

Can you imagine what it's like to be truly persecuted for your faith? Those to whom Peter wrote this letter didn't have to imagine. They were living it. It was to them that Peter wrote these words from chapter 4, verse 12:

*<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

How would those words sit on your ears if you lived in Nigeria, where more than 5,000 Christians are known to have been killed last year alone, simply because they're Christians?

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

How would those words sit on your ears if you lived in Afghanistan, unable to gather with other Christians, keeping your own faith deeply hidden, even from your family?

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

Peter isn't saying that the persecution is something God wants. He's not saying that God ordained murder and discrimination and unemployment and prison to test whether or not their faith was real. There's nothing in any of those things that comes from God. What he's saying is that this suffering isn't a surprise. This suffering isn't a one-off kind of thing. This suffering is what happens when the powers and the principalities that oppose God's rule confront Jesus' brothers and sisters.

After all, isn't that exactly what happened to Jesus? Jesus was crucified – the most brutal, excruciating way to execute a person the Roman Empire could devise. He was crucified because he spoke out against an oppressive regime, he spoke up for marginalized people, he challenged the fundamental worldview that said it was ok for people to suffer, if their suffering benefited the important people. Jesus was crucified because he embodied the kingdom of God.

A few weeks ago Heather preached from chapter 2 of 1 Peter.<sup>iv</sup> In that sermon she unpacked Peter's words in chapter 2, verse 20, in which Peter wrote: *if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God*. She pointed out that what makes enduring this suffering commendable, isn't the suffering itself, but that in that kind of suffering – suffering for doing good – suffering for living like Jesus... In that kind of suffering, we are actually following Jesus' example. We're suffering like he suffered for the same reasons he suffered. And that is commendable.

Peter goes further with it here in chapter 4. Not only is he commending those who suffer for doing good – for following Jesus – but he also invites them to rejoice. Listen to what he writes in verses 13 and 14 of chapter 4:

*<sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*

I wonder if we could rejoice if we were suffering like so many Christians suffer around the world. What does it even mean to rejoice when we're suffering?

I can tell you what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean we're supposed to take joy in our suffering. He's not telling us we're supposed to be masochists. Suffering is not, ever, joyous. But he's not saying to rejoice in the suffering itself, is he? He writes, *rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed*.

*Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings.*

Instead of allowing our suffering to fill us with bitterness or despair, rejoice. It's easy, when we're suffering, to feel abandoned by God. Sometimes God removes a person's suffering and sometimes he doesn't. We try to make sense of it, but if we're the one whose suffering continues, as hard as we may try to be ok with it, it's pretty natural to get fed up and to give up. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4. In verses 8 and 9 he wrote this:

*We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.*

Paul could write those words because he knew that in sharing the suffering of Jesus, he also shared the life of Jesus – the eternal, redeemed life of the resurrected Jesus. That's what Peter is talking about in his letter. He's saying that in this suffering for doing good – this suffering for living like Jesus – we glimpse a similar outcome as that experienced by Jesus. We see life out of death, hope out of despair, salvation out of loss. That's the source of the joy. The joy comes with believing – with knowing – that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, *If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.*<sup>v</sup>

Peter wrote to those persecuted Christians:

*<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*

The blessing is not the suffering. The blessing is the presence of God in the midst of it. I can think of no other reason anyone endures what people around the world endure as followers of Jesus, except that the Spirit of God rests on them. We must pray for these brothers and sisters that they never lose sight of God's Spirit with them. We must pray for these persecuted brothers and sisters that God's Spirit would remain tangible. We must pray for these suffering Christians that they would see their own suffering as akin to Christ's suffering, and would be able to hope in the promise of the kingdom to come, of a new creation in which there is no longer any suffering.

That's the first thing I think Peter has to say to us this morning.

But I don't think these words from 1 Peter are only meant as a call for us to pray. I think, maybe, they also challenge us to question if we're fully following Jesus. Are we as committed to justice, to peace, to righteousness as Jesus was? Have we lost the radicalness of Jesus amidst the comfort of a country and a city founded, at least on the face of it, upon Christian values? As I've reflected on this question of what 1 Peter has to say to us in our context, I keep thinking about a conversation I had with someone who serves in a denominational leadership role.

This person is part of a team of people who have been hosting conversations about race and racism. They're called the Intercultural and Racial Justice Working Group. I know most of the people who are part of this working group – some better than others. And I know that each of them is thoughtful and reflective and motivated solely by the desire to be like Jesus and help churches be true ambassadors of God's kingdom. This is the group that recommended the book we're going to be reading together in small groups beginning next week.<sup>vi</sup>

I've been part of a few conversations hosted by this group, and one of the things that struck me was that the leader always opens the conversation by acknowledging that these conversations may be hard – they may bring up all sorts of feelings we don't know what to do with. We're told that if we choose to have similar conversations in our churches, we should be prepared for some backlash. This is not something I've understood. It seems to me that racial inequality is a blatant reality and that Jesus' example requires us to confront it and work against it. So I asked the leader of the group, "Why the warning?" That's when I learned that the simple existence of this Intercultural and Racial Justice Working Group has been cause for quite a few ministry leaders in the denomination to call and complain about its existence. There's apparently been quite a backlash and some outright anger that this team even exists.

I think, maybe, Peter's words are for this team of people in this country. I think that while we usually talk about the persecution coming from outside Christianity, in our own context, it's possible that the persecution comes from inside Christianity. That's not so different from what

Jesus endured, is it? Because he didn't just endure suffering at the hands of the Roman empire, but he endured suffering at the hands of his own religious leaders.

Dominique Gilliard, the author of *Subversive Witness*, makes a really clear case for the sin behind systems that privilege some and not others as well as the sinfulness behind anything done to maintain those systems and that privilege. And he makes a really clear case for the responsibility of Jesus' followers to challenge those systems, to use what power and privilege we may have, to tear them down and to participate with God in building a new kind of world – a kingdom of God kind of world. If we do that, there will be backlash. If we follow the Jesus who sought to “transform oppressive systems [and] assert the importance of the lives of marginalized people,”<sup>vii</sup> there will be people – often powerful people – who won't like what we're doing and will react like they reacted to Jesus back in the day.

And Peter speaks into that when he writes,

*<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*

Peter continues in chapter 5. At verse 6 we begin reading his last words. Given everything he's written – everything he's had to say about suffering and about hope in the midst of the suffering – he offers these words. They're something of a *how to* when faced with suffering.

*<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup> Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup> Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Although it is impossible to know for certain who was the intended audience of this letter, I'm convinced by Karen Jobes' argument, presented in her volume of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>ii</sup> Statistics Canada. [Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population](#).

<sup>iii</sup> Open Doors. [World Watch list 2023](#).

<sup>iv</sup> <https://walmer.ca/podcast/hope-in-our-suffering-2/>

<sup>v</sup> 2 Timothy 2:11-12.

<sup>vi</sup> Dominique Dubois Gilliard. *Subversive Witness: Scriptures Call to Leverage Privilege*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

<sup>vii</sup> Jennifer T. Kaalund. [Commentary on 1 Peter 4:11-14; 5:6-11](#). Working Preacher. 2020.