

# AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PETER'S UNDERSTANDING ON CHRISTIAN SUFFERING IN 1 PETER 4:12-19

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## *Introduction*

Suffering is a central concern of 1 Peter in which the subject is addressed more often than any other of the NT writings.  $\pi\alpha\sigma\chi\omega$  is used 12 times, which constitutes almost one-third of the uses of this verb in the New Testament. The book sheds light on a situation in early Christianity in which Christians were beginning to face social alienation. The exhortation to remain true to God with moral integrity is combined with highlighting the tension that exists between maintaining the Christian identity and consequently experiencing abuse and pressure from a hostile society. This aspect of Peter's first epistle gives it a timeless and universal appeal.

1 Peter 4:12-19 presents us with Peter's most concentrated attention to the theme of suffering and insight into his understanding of it. It is the intent of this paper to exegete the original Greek of this passage to find both a contextual and a universal meaning for the existence of suffering among the people of God.

## *Exegesis*

<sup>12</sup>Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery trial among you, coming to you for the purpose of testing, like a strange [thing] is happening to you, <sup>13</sup>but inasmuch as you share in the sufferings of Christ, continue rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you might rejoice, celebrating exceedingly. <sup>14</sup>If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup>Now none of you must suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a factious meddler; <sup>16</sup>but if [one suffers] as a Christian he is not to be ashamed but he must glorify God in this name. <sup>17</sup>Because it is time for judgement to begin with the house of God; and if first with us what outcome [will there be] for the ones refusing to believe in the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup>And if the righteous one is saved with difficulty, where will the ungodly and sinful one appear (end up)? <sup>19</sup>Therefore, those also suffering according to the will of God must entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing good.

For me, the whole of 1 Peter can be read against a backdrop of suffering. The idea is introduced in 1:6 and references to suffering are peppered throughout the epistle (2:4,12,19-20, 21-24 ; 3:9, 13-17 ; 4:1-2,4,12-19 ; 5:1,9-10). Even the exhortations included in the letter communicate how to behave in such a way as to minimise suffering and support each other in the face of suffering. This passage comes toward the end of Peter's letter, embedded in a section dealing primarily with a Christian response to opposition (3:13 - 5:11), after having addressed some basic principles of Christian living (1:13 - 2:10) and the household codes and instructions for moral behaviour (2:11 - 3:12). It is also strategically placed before and after specific instructions to the believers and the Christian leaders on how to **be** the church, highlighting, on the one hand, that suffering is a characteristic of belonging to the church and, on the other, the importance of the nurturing care and support of the Christian community in the face of suffering.

Attention is drawn to our passage by the textual prominence given by an almost false doxological ending to the letter (4:11) and a re-start of Peter's message in verse 12, beginning with another emphatic greeting:  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta\tau\omicron\iota$  (2:11). Some see this as an indication that this last section of 1 Peter is an attachment of another letter or an afterthought added later than the original writing of the letter<sup>1</sup>. But, consider the strong thematic ties to the rest of the letter (see references listed above) and particularly the mirror image literary flow of:

reintroduction of the theme of suffering:	4:1	=	4:12-13
an indication of the cause of their suffering:	4:3-4	=	4:14,16

a warning of judgement:	4:5-6	=	4:17-18
words of consoling instruction:		4:7-11	= 5:1-9

Rather than adding an afterthought, we find Peter both summarising and re-emphasising what he has been alluding to regarding suffering throughout his epistle and which has been central since 3:13, albeit with a more urgent note. What is significantly different in this passage is that the language of conditionals (1:6, 2:19,20, 3:14,17) has disappeared and the use of present tense verbs (ξενιζεσθε, γινομενη, and συμβαινοντος) indicates that Peter is now addressing an ongoing actual rather than a possible persecution. He gives particular attention to the **cause**, the **purpose**, and the desired **response** to this suffering.

When identifying the **cause** of suffering, Peter uses πασχω with its original meaning of being effected by something which stems from outside oneself<sup>2</sup>. This limits the application of the word "suffering" in this context to those things being inflicted on the readers by others, as opposed to suffering illness or other personal problems, or suffering that is self-inflicted. This is reinforced by the passive use of γινομενη (v12) and ονειδιζεσθε (v14). It is easy to assume that all NT references to suffering are linked exclusively to physical abuse, martyrdom, and to the widespread persecution that Christians suffered throughout the Roman Empire in the early days of the church. However, there is little external or internal evidence in 1 Peter to support that this is the case for the Asian Christians. Research has safely dated this letter as being written between AD62-96 (Davids 1990:9), which was before the time of the official Roman persecution of Christians beginning in 249 CE. Prior to this time Christian persecution against individuals or groups was sporadic, locally restricted, and unsystematic (Elliott 98). Looking at the content of Peter's letter one notices that there is no reference to physical violence or the death or imprisonment of Christians. The abuse suffered by the Christians of Asia Minor at this time seems to be primarily verbal. This is supported by the many references Peter makes to Christ and Christians being slandered, reviled, insulted and maligned (2:12,23 ; 3:9,16 ; 4:4,14). Our passage emphasises the defamation of the readers for being followers of Christ. Verses 14 and 16 refer to being insulted because of the name of Christ (as Christ Himself had predicted in Mk 13:13, Lk 21:17, Jn15:21; see also Acts 9:16) and for wearing the label χριστιανος<sup>3</sup>. The 2 other references to this term in the NT (Acts 11:26, 26:28) indicate that this was not a name believers assigned to themselves but was a, more than likely, derogatory name given to them by non-believers.

However, one needs to be aware why verbal abuse was considered such a trial for 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. For this we need to understand a culture based on an honour-shame system. "Losing face", public humiliation and exposure of shame were grievous experiences (Marshall 153). External valuations on an individual or group were most important for status and acceptance in a community and therefore the society in which these Asian Christians resided was using shame as a major weapon (Davids 2002:145), because general disparagement and rumour-mongering could lead to loss of reputation, distrust, social ostracism (and one only needs to read the Gospels to realise how severe this was for those stigmatised by disease or their profession), jealousy, civil and legal actions being brought against them, unemployment, intolerance, hatred, and possibly physical violence, as even Peter himself had experienced (Acts 5:40). It was this way with Christ. When Jesus addressed His disciples in Luke 22:28 as ones who had been with Him in his trials (πειρασμος, the sufferings of His passion had not yet begun. Christ was therefore also talking about the mocking, derision, reviling, and insults He had been receiving that fed the groundswell of opposition which eventually led to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Peter is quick to point out in v15 how his readers were NOT to suffer. Suffering must not be for justly deserved behaviours, reiterating what he said in 2:20, for the blessing of v14 does not cover wrongdoing. They must not be murderers, thieves, evildoers, or meddlers<sup>4</sup>.

When addressing the **purpose** to which their suffering can be applied, Peter reveals the theological content of his understanding of suffering. At the risk of completely contradicting his encouraging rhetorical question and two 4<sup>th</sup> class conditionals of remote possibility in 3:13-14 and 17, Peter begins in v12 by exhorting his readers to not be surprised by the trials *actually* being encountered nor to consider them strange (cf. 1 John 3:13, 1 Thess 3:3-4). He could be primarily addressing the Gentiles here who, unlike the Jewish Christians, would not be familiar with the concept of suffering for your religion (Elliott 774), but is also applicable to all of his readers who live with the general

disillusionment of doing right and yet being defamed for it. However, the reasons why they should not be surprised are of major importance.

Firstly, suffering is a natural and expected way to test the quality of their faith and form it, as Job testifies (Job 23:10) and Christ experiences (Heb. 5:8). The use of both the nouns of **πυρώσις** and **πειρασμός** in verse 12 bring out the intent of Peter's meaning. **Πυρώσις** comes from the noun **πυρ** (fire) and literally means a burning or fiery test. **Πειρασμός** refers to testing something in an attempt to learn its true qualities, not unlike the process of refining metals through fire, linked specifically in meaning to 1:7. In using these terms together, Peter talks about testing the character of their faith through suffering, and is not necessarily commenting on the degree of their suffering. This understanding of suffering is also found in Romans 5:3-4 and James 1:2, and is probably based on the Judaic expectation of divine examination of faith (Gen 22:1, Deut 8:2,16, Ps. 7:9, 26:2, 139:23,24, 1 Cor 3:13, Heb 11:17, James 1:12).

Secondly, suffering is a primary way of identifying oneself with Christ. As Christ came to earth to identify with us by entering into our suffering, so we in turn identify ourselves with Him as we share in His suffering. What the readers were enduring was not necessarily identical to what Christ had fully suffered, but actually drew them into a fellowship (**κοινωνία** with Christ through suffering similar experiences and for similar reasons (v13). Once again the emphasis here is not on the degree of suffering. **καθώς** is best translated as "inasmuch" or "since" rather than in words that refer to a sense of proportion. In this way, the consequential rejoicing and blessing that comes from sharing in Christ's suffering (v13,14) is not dependent on quantitative measures. This rich theological concept is also found in Phil. 3:10 and Heb. 13:13.

Thirdly, suffering is the consummative part of God's plan of salvation. The testing of faith in v12 is the beginning of the expected divine judgement which, of necessity, begins with God's people before extending to the wicked (4:5,17-18). Peter here re-teaches the OT concept that before God's salvation is fully manifest, His people need to undergo preparatory judgement and purification, and the wicked judged (Ezek 9:4-6, Amos 3:2, Mal 3:1-6,17-18, 4:1) (Stibbs 163), reflecting Christ's teaching in Mt. 10:22, 25:31-46, the underlying theme of Revelation, and Paul's teaching in 2 Thess 1:4-10 and 1 Cor. 11:32. In v18 Peter elevates Proverbs 11:31 to a new eschatological level (Kelly 193) using it to affirm that suffering is a severe but necessary and effective way for God to judge His people.

Peter addresses the **response** of his readers to suffering. Firstly, they are to follow the imperative to rejoice (v13), corresponding to Christ's admonition in Matt 5:11-12 and imitating Peter's own example in Acts 5:41. This is not a joy stemming masochistically from finding enjoyment in suffering itself, but is rooted in the privilege of sharing in Christ's suffering, and the suffering of His church, beginning with the prophets (Matt 5:12) and continuing to the present time (5:9). They are to replace the surprise of suffering with a joy in suffering, which is not the expected response. Of the 74 uses of the verb **χαίρω** in the NT, the only other time it is associated with suffering (apart from 4:13 and Matt 5:12) is Col 1:24 (Elliott 776). Yet this is possible when they fix their eyes eschatologically on the exulting joy and glory of the future (v13), as also taught in Romans 8:17-18 and Hebrews 10:32-36, 11:26. Secondly, they are to realise they are blessed by the Spirit's anointing (v14)<sup>5</sup>, a repetition of 3:14 but with an added explanation of how they are blessed, beautifully reminiscent of Christ's anointing (Is. 11:2, Mt. 3:16). Thirdly, they are not to be ashamed but are to be counter-cultural by bringing honour to the derogatory nickname of "Christian" (v16). This is a poignant exhortation given the honour-shame culture in which they lived, and reverses the condition of being "reviled for the name of Christ" in v14. Peter is redefining for his readers what is honourable, contrasting the contemporary view with the Kingdom of God value system. This command is echoed in 2 Timothy 1:8,12. Fourthly, they are to bring glory to God (v16). How beautifully and effectively the shame and glory of suffering are juxtaposed throughout the epistle (1:6-7,11, 2:12, 5:10) and in this passage (v13,14,16). Indeed their whole response to and conduct in suffering should be for the ultimate purpose of glorifying God. Fifthly, they are also to follow Christ's example of 2:23 (cf. Lk 23:46) in entrusting themselves to God the Creator (v19). Descriptions of God as creator are frequent in LXX and the Apocrypha, but this is its only appearance in the NT (Kelly 195), reminding the readers that He is the Master Designer whose ultimate plan is never jeopardised, no matter what the circumstances, and that He is therefore totally trustworthy and faithful. And all of this is to be done in the context of living honourably in their societies by continually doing good (v19), as Peter has outlined in 2:11-12, 2:13-3:12.

### *Conclusion/Application*

Clearly in this passage, Peter sees suffering as something that God allows as a form of judgement in determining genuine faith, as a means of identifying with Christ and sharing in His experiences, as a cause for rejoicing and a source of blessing, and as an opportunity to give witness to God in a hostile world. He works hard at keeping his readers focused on the positive aspects, not allowing them to use their sufferings as a basis for self-pity, complaint, accusation against God, or irresponsible behaviour. In doing so his message is universal and timeless.

Peter's message is applicable to every Christian at the level of how being aligned with Christ raises or lowers our status within society. Obviously, honour and shame were stronger influences in the world of the original readers of 1 Peter (as it still is in some modern cultures), but social status is a powerful thing in all societies, otherwise "peer pressure" would be rendered an oxymoron. The behaviour and speech that identify us as Christians is open for ridicule everywhere, whether at the very public level of Mel Gibson being maligned for following spiritual impulses to produce "The Passion of the Christ", or the less public imprisonment of a Chinese pastor refusing to cease from faithfully proclaiming God's word, or the unknown college student who refuses to indulge in the dissipated lifestyle of his/her classmates. It prepares us in a disciplinary way for the Kingdom of God. If we cannot endure such suffering, how can we endure God's judgement? This losing of status in front of our peers also places us in the company of Christ. He suffered for claiming to be the Christ, likewise we suffer for claiming the name of Christ. And as His focus was on the joy set before Him (Heb 12:2), so our behaviour and decisions now should be made in light of the glory awaiting us rather than on dishonourable ways to escape suffering. Lastly, no matter what is happening to us, we are never released from our obligation to continue doing good.

While neither invoked or provoked, suffering in the Christian life is a human experience that God uses in our lives to test us, discipline us, strengthen us, centre us, and ultimately prepare us for the revelation of Christ's glory (v13) at which time we will claim the full inheritance of our salvation.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kelly points out that doxologies are frequently found in the body of early Christian letters and are not customary in bringing epistles to an end. Only 2 Peter, Jude, and Romans end this way, and in the case of Romans it is almost certainly a liturgical insertion (Kelly 182). There are also textual links between this section and that which precedes the doxology: use of the verb *ξενίζω* in 4:4 and 4:12, the repetition of glorifying God in 4:11 and 4:16 (Kelly 184). Further textual links between this passage and the rest of 1 Peter are discussed within this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In the time of Homer *πασχω* could mean experiencing something good or bad, but because most references began having a negative connotation, by Peter's day it was only used to describe unpleasant experiences (Brown 719).

<sup>3</sup> The term *χριστιανος* involves borrowing a Latin ending *-ianus/ianus* which, when added as a suffix to a proper name (as in the use of Herodians in Matt 22:16 and Mark 3:6) denotes an adherent or client of the one named (Elliott 789).

<sup>4</sup> Murdering, thieving, and doing evil normally appear in vice lists, but meddling is a new addition. Not only does it not appear anywhere else in the NT, prompting textual variations to cope with it (Elliott 785), it also does not appear in any of the Greek literature of the time (although Epiphanius uses it in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when talking about people interfering in the business of others), suggesting it to be a Petrine coinage (Kelly 189). Its usage hints at the possible temptation of Asian Christians to be overly zealous in trying to order the lives of others or society as a whole. This was not helpful to their cause, even if their motives were good.

<sup>5</sup> The unusual reduplication of the definite article in *το της δοξης δαι το του Θεου πνευμα* gives rise to textual variants (Aland 795) and invites different interpretations to the translation of the phrase. It could mean that two distinct subjects are needed with either *το της δοξης* being equivalent to "the presence of the glory" (i.e. Shekinah) (Kelly 187) or to the Son as "the glory" of the Godhead, giving a powerful reference to the Trinity with the *Spirit* of *Christ* and of *God* resting upon them (Stibbs 160). Either way, it is one and the same Spirit which is given as a special anointing to these Christians, echoing the promise of Christ in John 14:23 with the borrowed words of Isaiah 11:2. A number of manuscripts also add *κατα μεν αυτους βλασφημειται, κατα δε υμας δοξαζεται* (Aland 795) but although clearly a very ancient gloss, it is unnecessary (Kelly 188).

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