



[1 Peter 4:12-19.](#) [Enduring Hardship](#)

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There is little question that many people experience hardship in this life. In general we witness a world where poverty and pestilence are common, yet it is a world where enough food can and is produced to meet the needs of everyone. We see wars and military actions that destroy the infrastructure of nations and acts of terrorism that attack the foundations of society's security. We witness the consequence of man's sin towards others on a continual basis. We also witness hardship that comes from the result of natural disasters as they can interfere with the patterns of our daily lives.

As Christians live out their faith, they will also experience hardship because their world view and their stand for the truth of the gospel is in conflict with this secular and pagan world. For some Christians that hardship may be found in no more than an occasional critical word. For others, that hardship may become real as they face choices that bring consequences in important areas of life such as family and employment. There are still many places in this world where a profession of Christian faith can bring great personal and physical risk where governing structures are actively persecuting the church.

The first-century church was experiencing hardship from all of these sources. Much like the experience of Jews and Arabs today, a profession of faith usually brings rejection by the family. The early church found it difficult to take part in the regular market of the day since the Jews declared their Christian family members to be dead, and the Greeks considered Christians to be unenlightened. It was difficult to find employment, and land ownership was almost beyond question.

1 Peter 4:12. *Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:*

It is natural to respond to hardship with alarm, The word translated "strange" could also be translated "inappropriate." When we experience hardship we invariably consider that something is wrong, out of place, and needs correction. However, Peter reminds us that when we experience hardship at the hands of this world that is directly brought on by its conflict with the gospel we should not be surprised at all. In fact, if we are not in conflict with this world, and if we are not experiencing some kind of

persecution or hardship, it may be possible that we are simply not taking a stand for the gospel.

1 Peter 4:13. *But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.*

We may be reminded of the introduction of James' letter when he admonishes the faithful to count it all joy when they encounter the trials of persecution.¹ James spends a good deal of his writing describing that God has a very positive and specific purpose for allowing His people to experience suffering: that through the experience they will become stronger and more patient, better prepared to share the grace of God with a lost world. Peter adds a reward that is omitted by James: All will witness the second coming of Christ, either while alive, or risen from the grave, and when His glory is so revealed one can look back and remember the times of faithfulness and be glad.

Any time we think that we are unjustly suffering for the name of grace, we can simply remember Jesus Christ's suffering. Each of the gospel writers reminds Christians that they are partakers of Jesus' suffering, abuse at the hands of a wicked and sin-filled world that simply does not know the context or eternal impact that their behavior engenders. Jesus' demonstrated unconditional forgiveness towards those who treated Him with such injustice, and the Holy Spirit that resides in the hearts of the faithful will lead them to imitate Jesus. The world responds to persecution with anger and retribution. The faithful respond to persecution with joy and forgiveness. This is a tough standard to live by when our pride gets in the way, but an easy standard to attain when we truly are submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 4:14. *If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.*

One of the most frequent reasons Christians cite for failing to live out the gospel boldly is their fear of reproach. It is far easier to compromise in public and refrain from overtly demonstrating your faith and love for others than it is to "expose yourself" by showing your faith in Christ. This becomes more and more of an issue when we live in cultures that denigrate faith. Because of this many (or most?) Christians are

¹ James 1:3, ff.

indistinguishable from this secular and pagan world as they live what look to others like secular and pagan lives, reserving their piety for those moments when they are surrounded by other Christians.

We are not alone when it comes to fear of reproach. A most significant recorded discussion that took place between Paul and Peter involved an event when Peter shied away from his Christian fellowship when he was in the presence of Jews.² We often find ourselves positively impressed by those who “wear their faith on their shirtsleeve” and are quick to show their faith in public, finding ourselves embarrassed by our fears. Certainly, it is not the Holy Spirit that is invoking this spirit of fear,³ and the work of the kingdom is not promoted when we succumb to this fear. We also miss out on the blessing of being a part of what God is doing around us when we turn our backs.

How do we overcome this fear? If we trust in the word of God we find in this passage that the very thing we fear as a negative experience is actually something that is positive, something that can promote both joy and happiness. Peter is quite experienced with the circumstances of reproach, probably far more than we have ever, or could ever know. Peter states that we can be over-the-top happy when we experience reproach because the Holy Spirit and all of the glory of God come to rest upon us at those times.

The reward for overcoming our fear is great. When we take a stand for the grace of God, God looks upon the act with great favor. As the ultimate judge, God is quite capable of judging those who would bring reproach upon His name and upon those who carry it.

1 Peter 4:15. *But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters.*

Peter does make it clear that the suffering or reproach that he refers to is that which results from the works of the Spirit of God, not from the works of the flesh. When one suffers the consequences of their sin they will not receive the blessings that he refers to in the previous verse. Though Peter states four specific acts of sin, he is referring to acts of sin in general. He does present a spectrum from murder, considered one of the most grievous sins, to the work of a busybody, probably considered a small sin compared with the others.

² c.f. Galatians 2:11 ff.

³ 2 Timothy 1:7.

It may be useful to illustrate the need for the application of wisdom as we separate works of the Spirit from works of the flesh. The government of China does allow its citizens to practice Christianity, but it does not allow public preaching. If, on a recent trip to China, I were to stand at a street corner with a Bible and start preaching to the passersby, there is a good possibility that I would be arrested and spend a few months in a brutal prison environment. I might be tempted to think my suffering was for the LORD, but wisdom reveals that my suffering was brought on by my own choice, a choice to rebel against the government of China. There are ways to effectively and legally share God's message of grace in China without breaking National law.

We can see that simply labeling an act as godly does not necessarily make it a work of the Spirit. A true work of the Spirit will always be one that is led of the Holy Spirit and by being so led, is completely in agreement with God's Word, His will and His purpose. A work of the Spirit will always be consistent with God's unconditional *agape* love. Sincere prayer and the application of God's wisdom will help us to ascertain when it is appropriate to act in a way that may bring reproach, when it is truly the LORD who is being rejected rather than ourselves.

As Peter admonishes the faithful to be free of such suffering and reproach the implication is simple: do not be involved in works of the flesh, but rather be busy about works of the Spirit.

1 Peter 4:16. *Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.*

Though the world may work to shame the faithful, God sees no such shame. Peter notes that a Christian can take that incident of shame and glorify God through it. This may also be applied as we witness the work of others who may experience suffering as a consequence of their faithfulness. If the church is living a life that is indistinguishable from the world, it will also join with the world in criticizing and condemning Christians for their faithfulness. Consequently, it is not unusual for church members to be critical and judgmental of other Christians who openly demonstrate their faith either in worship of the LORD or in their service to others.

When the church ridicules and derides Christians for their faithful stand, it is buying into the world's viewpoint rather than that of the Spirit of God. The church is to be a place of support and encouragement for its

members, a place where forgiveness and peace is found. It is far easier to overcome the discouragement that the world would throw at the faithful when the faithful pray for and support one another without judgment or criticism.

Peter notes that there is no need for shame for those who are shamed by this world for their obedient behavior. Rather than feel shame, the very conflict with this world that promotes such shame is reason to celebrate the glory of God. This is in complete agreement with James' advice to find joy in persecution.⁴

1 Peter 4:17. *For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?*

Peter understands the incarnation of the Messiah as a seminal event in the experience of mankind, one that certainly changed his life as he came to meet Jesus and accept his task of apostleship. Peter understands that the redeeming work of God offered to the lost people of this world is built upon the context of the church. Consequently, it is through the church, and by its example, that the judgment of this world culture begins. If the church remains like the world and is indistinguishable from it, the gospel will not be seen, it will not be shared, and people will remain lost in their sin. Consequently the responsibility that God has given to the faithful is great. A fear of reproach that diminishes the sharing of God's grace diminishes Kingdom work and opens people of faith to judgment. Peter states that the judgment upon the apathetic church comes before the judgment of the ignorant lost.

Peter provides both a positive and a negative motivation for the faithful to overcome their fear of reproach and suffering for works of the Spirit.

1 Peter 4:18. *And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?*

The real difference between the lost and saved people of this world is found through the work of God's grace on behalf of those who have placed their faith in Him. Outside of that work of faith, we are all subject to the eternal destruction that is the consequence of sin. Both the saved and the sinner are engaged in sinful behavior. Peter's statement is much like the modern idiom, "but for the grace of God, go I." We all deserve an eternal,

⁴ James 1:3.

condemning judgment from God, and those who fail to serve God and exercise that rebellion to the detriment of the faithful will find that judgment at the end of days.

The faithful may never see vindication this side of the grave, but can be encouraged to know that vindication is sure. Yet, the faithful should not be unloving or unforgiving towards the persecutor since salvation itself is an undeserved gift of God.

1 Peter 4:19. *Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.*

As long as the church and its members take a stand for God's love, and for the truth of God's word, it will always be in conflict with this secular and pagan world. When that stand is firm and requires a response from this world, the response will be one of derision, scorn, and persecution. Understanding that obedience is God's will, those who suffer for their obedience can be encouraged to know that God is "keeping their souls" as He blesses and approves of those who take a stand for Him against the evil of this world. Those who know God know of His faithfulness, a steadfastness that is uncompromising and never-ending. God shows His faithfulness as He blesses those who place their trust in Him, and as He judges unto eternal separation those who do not.

Peter has been writing to those who suffer reproach for their stand for the LORD in an ungodly world. It is this fear of reproach that many Christians cite as their reason for compromising the expression of their faith and for their failure to submit themselves fully to the task of sharing God's love with this lost world. Peter reminds us that we should expect that reproach, but rather than fear it, the faithful can embrace that reproach as evidence of their obedience to God, celebrating His approval of our sacrifice, and knowing that He will not only reward the faithful for their obedience, but He will also vindicate them through His perfect and complete work of judgment upon all who would blaspheme His name and bring reproach, scorn, and persecution upon His church.