

Suffering for Christ



SABBATH—APRIL 29

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Peter 1:6; 1 Peter 3:13–22; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12–14; Revelation 12:17; 1 Peter 4:17–19.

MEMORY VERSE: “You were chosen to do good even if you suffer. [That is] because Christ suffered for you. He left you an example that he expects you to follow” (1 Peter 2:21, NIV).

THE HISTORY OF PERSECUTION in the first few hundred years of the Christian church is well known. The Bible itself shows the kind of persecution that the church would go through. We can see very clearly this persecution in the book of Acts. Persecution brings suffering. Persecution is also very real in the lives of the Christians who Peter is writing to.

In the first chapter of his letter, Peter talks about the suffering that believers experience because of persecution. “You may have had to suffer sadness in all kinds of trouble. Your troubles have come in order to prove that your faith is real. Your faith is worth more than gold” (1 Peter 1:6, 7, NIV). One of the last comments Peter makes in the letter also deals with suffering (read 1 Peter 5:10).

In Peter’s short letter, there are three groups of verses that deal with his readers’ suffering for Christ (1 Peter 2:18–25; 1 Peter 3:13–21; 1 Peter 4:12–19). So we can see that the suffering caused by persecution is a major theme of 1 Peter. And we turn our study to that theme.



Troubles come in order to show us how real our faith is.

PERSECUTION OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS (1 Peter 1:6)

Read 1 Peter 1:6 and 1 Peter 5:10. What is Peter talking about in these verses? And how does he tell his readers to respond to what they are facing?

For the first few hundred years of church history, just being a Christian could result in a horrible death. A letter written to the Roman Emperor Trajan shows how unsafe it was to be a Christian at that time. The letter was from Pliny. Pliny wrote the letter when he was governor of Pontus and Bithynia (A.D. 111–113). These were two of the areas mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1.

Pliny wrote to Trajan asking what he should do about people who were accused of being Christians. Pliny explained that he had put to death those who said that they were Christians. Others said that they had been Christians before, but now they were not. Pliny allowed them to prove their innocence. He would let them live if they offered incense¹ to statues of Trajan and other gods and if they cursed Jesus. If they refused, he would kill them.

There were times in the first century that Christians faced serious danger for just being Christians. This risk was especially true under Emperors (rulers) Nero (A.D. 54–68) and Domitian (A.D. 81–96).

But the persecution talked about in 1 Peter is a different kind. There are few actual examples in the letter of the persecution Peter speaks of. But perhaps these examples included being blamed falsely of wrongdoing (1 Peter 2:12). And they may have included the persecution Christians faced from unbelievers who spoke against them in a negative and insulting way. Or believers may have faced public scorn for their faith (1 Peter 3:9; 1 Peter 4:14).

Christians faced severe tests and hardships. But it seems that they did not face widespread imprisonment or death, at least at that time. Even so, living as Christians would put believers at odds with important laws and practices of wider first-century society. As a result, Christians could suffer because of their beliefs. So Peter addresses very real and serious concerns when he writes this first letter.



For the first few hundred years of church history, just being a Christian could result in a horrible death.

DEFINITIONS

1. incense—a substance that is used often in religious ceremonies and produces a strong and pleasant smell when it is burned.

SUFFERING AND THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST (1 Peter 3:13–22)

Read through 1 Peter 3:13–22. How should Christians respond to those who persecute them for their faith? What is the same about the sufferings of Jesus and the sufferings experienced by the believers in 1 Peter for their faith?

Peter says, “But suppose you do suffer for doing what is right. Even then you will be blessed” (1 Peter 3:14, NIV). By saying this, he echoes the words of Jesus: “ ‘Blessed are those who suffer for doing what is right’ ” (Matthew 5:10, NIV). Then Peter says that Christians should not fear those who attack them. Instead, they should “honor Christ as Lord” in their hearts (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). This is because honoring Jesus in their own hearts will help them to stop feeling afraid when being attacked.

Peter then suggests that Christians always should be able to explain the hope that they have. But they should do so in an appealing way. They should do so with humble (not proud) hearts and deep respect or fear. “Fear” is sometimes translated to mean “deep respect”; read 1 Peter 3:15, 16.

Peter warns that Christians also should make sure that they do not give others a reason to blame them for wrongdoing. They must keep their hearts and minds clear of guilt (1 Peter 3:16). Being pure and free from guilt is important. Such a pure and faithful life will put to shame those who falsely blame Christians.

Clearly, there is no praise or honor in suffering for being a wrongdoer (1 Peter 3:17). It is suffering for doing good and doing the right thing that makes the important difference.

Peter then uses the example of Jesus. Christ Himself suffered for His holy and faithful life. His pure life always made those who hated Him feel scolded. No one suffered as much for doing right and not wrong as Jesus did.

But Jesus’ suffering also was the only way we could be saved. He died in the place of sinners. “The one who did what is right suffered for those who [do not] do right” (1 Peter 3:18, NIV). Jesus died so those who believe in Him will have the promise of eternal life.

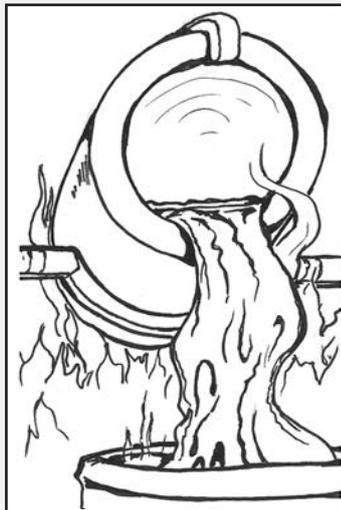
Have you ever suffered, not because you did wrong, but because you did right? What happened? What did you learn about being a Christian? And what does it mean to show the pure and holy life of Christ?



Honoring Jesus in our hearts will help us to stop feeling afraid when we are attacked for our faith.

THE TRIAL BY FIRE (1 Peter 4:12–14)

Read 1 Peter 4:12–14. Why does Peter say in these verses that Christians should not be surprised at their suffering? Read also 2 Timothy 3:12 and John 15:18.



Fire can be destructive. But it also can clean away impure things.

Peter makes it clear that Christians will suffer persecution for their faith. We must not be surprised when such persecution comes. As Paul tells us, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be treated badly” (2 Timothy 3:12, NIV). Jesus Himself warns His followers about what they would face: “ ‘Then people will hand you over to be treated badly and killed. All nations will hate you because of me. At that time, many will turn away from their faith. They will hate each other. They will hand each other over to their enemies’ ” (Matthew 24:9, 10, NIV).

According to Ellen G. White, “So it will happen with all who live godly in Christ Jesus. Persecution and blame wait for all who are filled with the Spirit of Christ. The type of persecution changes with the times. But the spirit that is behind it is the same that has killed the chosen of the Lord ever since the days of Abel.”—Adapted from *The Acts of the Apostles [Teachers; Leaders]*, page 576.

Read Revelation 12:17. What does this verse say about how real persecution will be for Christians in the last days?

There is no question that for a faithful Christian persecution can be something that happens all the time. That is why Peter warns his readers about the “terrible things” (1 Peter 4:12, NIV) or “the fiery trial” (NKJV) they will face.

Fire is a good symbol, or word picture. Fire can be destructive. But it also can clean away impure things. It depends on what is being burned. For example, houses are destroyed by fire. But silver and gold are purified by it. In other words, a Christian should never try to cause his or her own persecution. But God can bring good out of it. So Peter is really telling his readers (and us): “Yes, persecution is bad. But do not be discouraged. Persecution is to be expected. So move on ahead in faith.”

What can we do to lift up, encourage, and help those who are suffering for their faith?

JUDGMENT AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD (1 Peter 4:17–19)

Read 1 Peter 4:17–19. Now read Isaiah 10:11, 12 and Malachi 3:1–6. These verses are about judgment. What teaching about judgment can be found in all of these verses?

All of these verses show that judgment starts with the people of God. Peter even links the sufferings of his readers to the judgment of God. For Peter, the sufferings that his Christian readers are experiencing might even be the judgment of God. This judgment begins with believers. “Here is what people who suffer because of God’s plan should do. They should commit [dedicate; give] themselves to their faithful Creator. And they should continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19, NIV).

Read Luke 18:1–8. How does this story help us understand God’s judgment?

In Bible times, judgment was usually something that people wanted. The picture of the poor widow in Luke 18:1–8 shows this attitude toward judgment. The widow knows she will win her case if she can find a judge who will take her case. She does not have enough money or an important enough position in society to get her case heard. But she finally persuades the judge to hear her case and to give her what she deserves. As Jesus says, “ ‘God’s chosen people cry out to him day and night. [Will he not] make things right for them? Will he keep putting them off?’ ” (Luke 18:7, NIV).

Sin has brought evil into the world. And from the beginning of human history, God’s people have waited a long time for God to make things right again. “ ‘Lord, who will not have respect for you? Who will not bring glory to your name? You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you. They see the things you do are right’ ” (Revelation 15:4, NIV).

Think of all the evil in the world that has gone unpunished. And all the evil that is still unpunished. So why is the idea of justice and of God’s holy judgment so important for us as Christians? What hope do you get from the promise that justice will be done?



The widow knows she will win her case if only she can find a judge who will take her case.

HAVING FAITH DURING HARD TIMES (1 Peter 5:8)

As we have read, Peter writes to believers who suffer for their faith. And Christian history shows persecution only got worse for Christians, at least for a while. Surely many Christians in the years that followed found comfort in what Peter wrote. No doubt, many do today, too.

But why do Christians suffer? That is a very old question. The book of Job is one of the first books of the Bible to be written. And suffering is a main theme of the book of Job. Indeed, if there were anyone (besides Jesus) who suffered for being good, it was Job. After all, even God says of Job: “ ‘Have you thought about my servant Job? There [is not] anyone on earth like him. He is honest. He does what is right. He has respect for God and avoids evil’ ” (Job 1:8, NIV). But look at how much poor Job suffers! He suffers not because he is evil. He suffers because he is good.



We suffer because we are in the middle of the great war between Christ and Satan.

Read 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9; and Revelation 2:10. How do these verses help answer the question of why we suffer?

The short answer is that we suffer because we are in the middle of the great war between Christ and Satan. This war is not just a symbol, or word picture, for the battle between good and evil in our hearts. There is a real devil and a real Jesus fighting a real war for human beings.

Read 1 Peter 4:19. How can this verse help us in whatever we struggle with now?

Sometimes our suffering does not come as a result of our sins. So we naturally ask the question Job asked, again and again: *Why?* And we often do not have an answer. As Peter says, all we can do, even in our suffering, is to give our souls to God and trust in Him.

Why is knowing personally God’s goodness and His love for you such an important part of being a Christian? Why is knowing God in this way very helpful to the person who is suffering? How can we all learn to know God better and to know how real His love is?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Sunday’s study talked about the persecution Christians faced. Here is more from the letter written to the emperor about what Christians suffered in the first few hundred years of the Christian Church: “Here is the method I have used for dealing with those who have been reported to me as Christians: I asked them whether they were Christians. If they said yes, I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of death. If they still insisted they were Christians, I ordered them to be killed.

“Then there were those who denied they were Christians. And there were those who denied they had ever been Christians. They repeated after me a prayer to the Gods. Then they offered praise with wine and frankincense,² to a statue of you. . . . And finally these individuals cursed Christ. It is said that those who are really Christians cannot be forced into doing any of these things. So I let these individuals who did them go free because they proved they were not Christians.”—Adapted from *Pliny Letters* (London: William Heinemann, 1915), book 10:96 (volume 2, pages 401–403).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① According to (as stated in) the letter written to the emperor mentioned above, what kind of problems did Christians face? What things happened in this letter that will happen again to Christians in the last days, according to the third angel’s message of Revelation 14:9–12? What do these things tell us about some of the deeper topics involved in the great war between Christ and Satan?

② “Those who honor the law of God have been blamed for bringing judgments upon the world. They will be seen as the cause of the terrible events happening in nature. They will be blamed for the war and bloodshed [killings; violence] among men. These wars are filling the earth with misery. The power that comes with the last warning has made the wicked very angry. Their anger flares against all who have received the message. Satan will cause an even greater spirit of hatred and persecution to grow.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 614, 615. We do not know exactly when these events will happen. And we do not know exactly what kind of persecution we will face. But when these events happen, how can we be ready to face those who oppose our faith? What is the secret to being prepared?



It is said that those who are true Christians cannot be forced to worship idols or curse Christ.

DEFINITIONS

2. frankincense—a substance that is burned for its sweet smell. It was used in religious ceremonies in Bible times.