

The First Epistle of Peter: A Textbook on Suffering

by Bryan Gibson

Some folks suffer because they do wrong. There is nothing commendable about that (4:15; 2:20). Other folks suffer because they do right. That **is** commendable, especially in the eyes of God (2:19-20; 3:14a). The obvious conclusion: "...it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil" (3:17).

It may be better, but it's not easy! It's not easy to be thought of as strange or ignorant, to get ridiculed and insulted, to endure false accusations, to be excluded from the "in crowd," to maybe even face the threat of death. The people to whom Peter wrote his first epistle—that's what they were facing, and here's what he said to help them (and us) endure. We'll divide this up into a series of do's and don'ts, just to make the points as clear as possible.

Don't be surprised by suffering, as if was some "strange thing" (4:12). Elsewhere, Paul wrote that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). Get used to it; it will happen.

Don't be discouraged by it, and don't let it wear you down, because it only lasts "a little while" (1:6)—especially when you contrast it with eternity.

Don't be ashamed of it, or embarrassed by it; instead glorify God for it (4:16; 2:6). The folks who are saying and doing these things to you—they're the only ones who should be ashamed (3:16).

Don't be afraid of those who persecute you—it's not like they can do you any **lasting** harm (3:13-16). They killed the Christ, and look how things turned out for Him (3:18, 22). Noah and his family—no doubt they suffered for the stand they took, but they were the ones standing on dry ground when the flood ended (3:18-22).

Don't retaliate—do not return "evil for evil, or reviling for reviling" (3:9). Follow the example of Christ (2:21), "who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (2:23).

Don't think you're the only one—brethren near and far are suffering the same things, perhaps even worse (5:9).

Don't try to fit in with the world to avoid this suffering—that's the very thing the devil wants you to do (5:8). This world is not your home, so don't behave like it is. "...as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (2:11). Don't live any longer "for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (4:2). Cast your lot with the people of this world, and that's when you'll be in real trouble, because "they will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (4:5). And it won't be pretty, because rest assured, their suffering will last more than just "a little while."

DO study God's word—obedience to His word gave you life, and that same word will now help you grow. Crave it the same way a newborn baby craves milk (1:22-2:3).

DO keep on doing good (2:12, 15, 20; 3:6, 11, 13, 16; 4:19), no matter how much pressure is put on you to do otherwise, no matter how much suffering you have to endure. That won't be easy, so DO remember these three things: (1) Remember the purpose for which you were called out of darkness—

to “proclaim the praises” of God, to be a light to those who are still in darkness (2:9-10, 12; 3:1-2, 16). (2) Remember what it cost your Savior to bring you out of darkness, what it cost Him to redeem you from the slavery of sin—His own “precious blood” (1:18-19). (3) Remember that your heavenly Father will judge you according to your work, and that He will do so “without partiality” (1:17).

DO learn to rejoice in the “blessing” (3:14) of suffering, for the following reasons: (1) You are suffering for Christ, the very one who suffered for you (4:13-14). (2) It has a good purpose—to “try” or “prove” you; to make you stronger; to help you develop a genuine faith (1:6-7; 4:12). (3) It presents a great opportunity—it’s when you’re suffering that your light shines the brightest (2:12, 15, 20). (4) It has a good end—partake of Christ’s sufferings, and you will also partake of His glory (4:13).

DO “be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (3:15). And don’t just say it; practice it. Back up your verbal defense with “good conduct” (3:15-16).

DO look out for your brethren, because they’re suffering too (5:9). Love them “fervently” (1:22; 4:8); “be hospitable” to them (4:9); use your gifts to minister to them (4:10); and speak to them “the oracles of God” (4:11).

DO remember that even though you are “rejected indeed by men” (2:4), you are accepted by God. He has made you part of His chosen generation, His royal priesthood, His holy nation. The world may not make you feel very special, but you are special to Him (2:9).

DO “be serious and watchful in your prayers” (4:7), because you do need God’s help.

DO remember that God is with you—that He will keep you by His power (1:5); that He will care for you (5:7); that He will “exalt you in due time” (5:6); and that He will, “after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (5:10).

DO “rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:13). That’s when you’ll finally get to go home, to the place God has reserved for you in heaven, an inheritance which is “incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away” (1:3-4). You’ve been reproached and reviled for too long (3:9; 4:14)—that’s over, from here on out it’s nothing but praise, honor, and eternal glory (1:7; 5:4, 10).

You see—“it is better...to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (3:17).