

The Christian Reaction to being Persecuted

Life often appears very unfair for a Christian. He or she sincerely tries to honour God. Every choice made follows the Bible's truth. The right way is followed even when it would cost less to do wrong. Yet as a result the Christian may continue to suffer, sometimes experiencing even more hardship. Is this how the Christian life should be?

Most people think that if a person does the right action, in a good attitude, then the best result will soon follow. But our experiences in life tell us that doesn't always work. Why not?

In my own ministry **sometimes I feel like Jeremiah**. He said: "You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" Jeremiah 12:1.

Jeremiah served God over 40 years during the largely disastrous reigns of five kings. Encouraging attempts at reform disappointingly fizzled out. Jeremiah stood against worldly kings, prophets and priests. This brought rejection by his fellows, Jeremiah 11:18-19, 18:18; by his family, 12:6; imprisonment and threats from his peers 20:2, 36:26; 38:6 (the cistern from which he was rescued probably by a Northern Sudanese!). Sometimes he even felt rejected by God, 15:15-18.

There I have been times in my own life, usually after a tough few months or years have passed, when I can look back on difficult events now finished. Then, because I have passed through the difficulties, **I may be able to feel like Joseph**. He said to his own brothers who had sold him to slave traders over 13 years before: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives". Genesis 50:20.

Joseph lived through 13 years of rejection by his brothers, including slavery, false accusation, wrongful imprisonment, and being overlooked by others he had personally helped. Genesis

37:2—41:46. Amazingly, he seems to have honoured God in his life all of this time and in every circumstance. Genesis 39:2-6; 39:21-23; 40:8; 41:16; 41:25; 41:41:28; 41:32; 41:37-40.

How can we live as God wants us to live when we face trouble and persecution—much of which comes because we are trying to honour God?

For myself I have to learn, and keep in my mind, what our Lord Jesus meant by His words: “great is your reward in heaven”.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because *great is your reward in heaven*, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”. Matthew 5:11,12.

Persecution and suffering because of our following Jesus is a reason for looking away from this world and thinking about heaven. **This focus puts proper perspective into our lives.** There may never be recompense for being wronged in this lifetime. “Christianity” that promises material wealth and perfect health all the time you live on earth is not the Christianity experienced by the New Testament believers.

John the Baptist faithfully followed God by his way of life and by his preaching the need for people to repent, Matthew 3:8. Jesus saw John as the last of the great Old Testament prophets and the chosen introducer of the Kingdom of God, Luke 16:16. Yet John was beheaded in a government prison. He lived and died for the future Kingdom.

Stephen was one of the church’s first servant administrators, Acts 6:5. He was a man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”. He crowned this ministry (his Greek name means “crown”) by witnessing wisely and boldly, 6:8-10. The opposition he faced led to his early death. He had a chance to speak to the whole Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. He faithfully outlined how people were

continually rejecting God's work, Acts 7. He spoke correctly about Jesus, but the response of his audience was to refuse to listen any more and to stone him to death, 7:57-60. Stephen died thinking about heaven, not about his suffering on earth.

Paul, who is called Saul in Acts 7:60-8:1, was a convert from Judaism to Christianity. The persecution he himself had inflicted on many Christians, Acts 8:3; 26:9-11; he quickly attracted on to himself, Acts 9:22-24; 9:28-29. During his travelling preaching he was frequently in physical danger of attack, Acts 13:49-50; 14:5-6; 14:19; 17:13; 19:26-32. Paul was imprisoned more than once, Acts 16:22-24; 21:27-36; 23:10-11; 27:1-2; 28:16. Although his body was under Roman house arrest, Paul's spirit was freely sharing Jesus Christ with everyone who visited him, Acts 28:30-31.

The Christian church in the New Testament was a suffering church. Jesus had forewarned His earliest disciples it would be—while it was here on this earth, Matthew 5:11-12. Early believers lived for a heaven reward, not an earthly one.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was the greatest example of this way of being governed in the present by the future.

Jesus was obediently in the centre of God the Father's will when He suffered and died on the cross. Hebrews 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, *who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*".

Jesus said focus your attention onto heaven. "Great is your reward in heaven". The thought of what will happen in heaven can bring a smile to your face even when your heart, your dreams and your body are being broken.

Early church leader James, a later born brother of our Lord Jesus, wrote: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”. James 1:2-4.

Trouble comes to us sometimes, not because of our sinfulness but because of our faithfulness! Having a relationship with the living God does not protect us from bad happenings in this life—but it helps us know how to respond to them in a Christian way.

When I lived in Khartoum I sometimes went to the boat building yards on the river Nile’s western shore along from Abu Rof. The men who worked there knew what to do with wood in order to make it useful in building their boats. The wood was seasoned to dry it and to strengthen it. It was cut to size to make it fit. It was planed to be smooth. It was jointed and then sealed to be waterproof. I imagine if a tree had feelings and could speak it would say: “Stop! Why are you hurting me so much?”

The answer, of course, would be this. “If you want to be useful as a boat, then you must go through all of these processes, painful though they are”.

When I suffer in my life I try and remember that I have placed my life into the hands of the Master carpenter, my Lord Jesus Christ. I can comfortably trust that He knows what is best. He is working to a plan. The end product will be absolutely wonderful. With my mind set on this, I am secure.

By looking at 1 Peter 4:19 let me conclude trying to underline **how Christians can respond when persecution threatens to overwhelm them**. I’ll break the verse into phrases.

“So then, / those who suffer / according to God’s will / should / commit themselves / to their faithful Creator / and continue to do good”.

“**So then**” links the verse into the whole letter Peter is writing. He is writing to Christians scattered throughout the world, 1 Peter 1:1, telling them not to be surprised at their painful trials, 1 Peter 4:12.

“**those who suffer**” implies that some more than others are chosen by God for this. (Although a measure of persecution is promised to *all* who live godly lives, 2 Timothy 3:12).

“**according to God’s will**” gives great comfort! Since it IS God’s will it will work out ultimately for our good:

1. God will see me and take me through it
2. God will choose when and how it will end
3. The events are not out of control, but in God’s control
4. I will become stronger, more Christ-like, through it because God is the craftsman working on me
5. Others may be helped by seeing Jesus in me

“**should**” allows for right and wrong responses to this. There is a Christian response and a less-than-Christian response.

“**commit themselves**” involves at least one step of faith and may be several of them! Concentrate on God, not the trouble. Keep placing yourself in God’s hands.
1 Corinthians 4:12 “.. when we are persecuted, we endure it”.

“**to their faithful Creator**”. Knowing God in His character is a great help while suffering. God is good, Psalm 106:1. God is holy, Exodus 15:11. God is kind, Romans 11:22. God is merciful, Ephesians 2:4-5. God is faithful in keeping His promises, Deuteronomy 32:3-4. God will never contradict His own character in His dealings with anyone.

“and continue to do good”. No excuses accepted. No exceptions made. Jesus went around doing good, Acts 10:38; and so should we—even to our enemies who hate us, Luke 6:27. He was rejected, and ultimately crucified. We must expect to be mistreated and persecuted.

Scanning the entire letter we can learn that:

- Suffering is temporary 1:6.
- Suffering improves genuine faith 1:7.
- Suffering focuses on the invisible God 1:8, 23
- Suffering was promised to Jesus Christ 1:11
- Suffering is overcome by an attitude of mind 1:13
- Suffering is a personal witness choice 2:11,12
- Suffering may well be unfair 2:19
- God is aware of our suffering 2:20
- Our Lord Jesus Christ's example is to be followed 2:21
- He did not retaliate although He could have 2:23
- Suffering is to be seen as a blessing 3:14
- A right attitude to our suffering is a witness to those around us 3:15
- Suffering—right or wrong—can be in God's will 3:17 Our Christian reaction to our suffering shows how our spiritual lives are more important than the physical 4:1
- Suffering should be expected 4:12
- Suffering is fellowship with Jesus 4:13
- Suffering brings special blessing from God 4:14
- Not all suffering is God's will for the believer! 4:15
- Suffering for Jesus' name is a good reason to praise God 4:16.

Jeremiah, Joseph, John, Stephen, Paul, James and Peter were simply people like us. They knew the presence of God the Holy Spirit in their lives as we do. As they followed Jesus in their daily decisions, He made them into fishers of men.

These Bible people sometimes felt angry. Other times they felt alone. From time to time the Bible records some of them arguing with God—or with Jesus here on earth—over what was right to happen and what was not.

Yet as we have surveyed some of the Bible's teaching on this subject we notice an undeniable theme common to all of them. The pain of persecution and suffering really hurts. But the price is one we are called to pay as Christians following our Lord. It is part of taking up our cross every day and following the Lord Jesus, Luke 9:23.

Since Jesus paid for us when He died on His cross, there can be no price too high for us to pay as we live to honour Him.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Why do you think Jesus pointed to the heavenly reward for those who suffer on earth?

Matthew 5:10-12; Matthew 24:44-47.

2. Share how various New Testament characters suffered for their faith.

How did they look at their life on earth?

What did they think about heaven?

Which one inspires you most? Why?

3. Explain what it means for a Christian to be “governed in the present by the future”.

4. Using 1 Peter 4:19 try to develop how you can encourage any suffering Christian.

5. “There is a Christian response and a less-than-Christian response” (to suffering).

Why do some Christians make a less-than-Christian response?

How can they be helped towards a Christian response?

6. Choose the best specific verse from 1 Peter and explain from it what your Christian response to persecution or other suffering should be.

What is most difficult about the response?

How may other Christians help you?

7. Why do you think Paul wrote, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted", 2 Timothy 3:12.

Don't forget to look at the passage surrounding this verse, at least chapters 3 & 4.