

## ***Sharing the Sufferings of Christ***

1 Peter 4:12-19

A man named Nik Ripken (a pseudonym) did relief work in Somalia in the early 1990s. He was actually in Mogadishu when the events described in the movie *Blackhawk Down* took place. After seeing so much corruption by those in power and so much suffering among ordinary people (starvation, legs being blown off by abandoned land mines, etc.) he began to question the goodness and power of God. And then one of his sons died from an illness. It's an understatement to say that his faith was in trouble.

That's when Nik and his wife accepted what they thought was a two-year assignment to go around the world and interview Christians who faced persecution. In a small village north of Moscow, Nik interviewed a man named Dmitri who had grown up in a believing family. Over time the Soviet government closed down so many churches that the closest church was a three-day walk away; so he and his family only went to church a couple of times a year. And so he began teaching his family the Bible one night a week. He taught them the traditional songs of the faith. And they prayed together.

Neighbors noticed what they were doing and wanted to join in. When their weekly gathering grew to 25 people the authorities noticed and warned him that "bad things would happen" if he didn't stop gathering to worship. When the group grew to 50 people he lost his job. When the group grew to 75 people the authorities burst into the gathering, slapped him repeatedly, threw him against the wall and warned him again. When the group grew to 150 people they sent him to jail for 17 years.

Those 17 years Dmitri was 600 miles away from his family. His sons grew up without a father. He was the only believer in a prison of 1,500 inmates. Two disciplines he learned from his father sustained him. First, every morning at daybreak, Dmitri would stand beside his bed, face the east, raise his arms to God and sing a song of praise to Jesus. The other prisoners would mock him, laugh at him, and throw food (and worse) at him to try to shut him up. Second, every time he found a scrap of paper he would take it back to his cell and write Bible verses on it, and stick it to a pillar with water that dripped into his room. When the guards noticed the Scriptures, they would take it down, beat Dmitri, and threaten to kill him if he didn't stop.

Dmitri's wife and children were persecuted in his absence. Eventually they led him to believe that his wife had been murdered and that his children had been taken into custody. He was finally a broken man. He told his guards that he would renounce Christ if he would be released so that he could find his children." The night before he was to sign a confession renouncing Christ, God miraculously showed him that his wife and children were alive and were praying for him. When the guards showed up the next day he refused to renounce Christ.

Eventually the guards decided to execute Dmitri in the courtyard. When Dmitri was dragged from his cell and down the corridor in the center of the prison, ". . .the strangest thing happened" (Ripken, *The Insanity of God*):

*Before they got to the courtyard, “fifteen hundred hardened criminals stood at attention by their beds. They faced the east and they began to sing. Dmitri told me that it sounded to him like the greatest choir in all of human history. Fifteen hundred criminals raised their arms and began to sing the HeartSong that they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning for all those years.*

*Dmitri’s jailers instantly released their hold on his arms and stepped away from him in terror.*

*One of them demanded to know, ‘Who are you?’ Dmitri straightened his back and stood as tall and as proud as he could.*

*He responded: ‘I am a son of the Living God, and Jesus is His name!’*

*The guards returned him to his cell. Sometime later, Dmitri was released and he returned to his family.”*

That story sounds very much like the New Testament: persecuted believers singing in prison, fellow prisoners taking notice when people suffered as Jesus did, boldly identifying with Jesus Christ instead of remaining silent. Stories such as Dmitri’s resurrected the faith of Nik Ripken. For the past 20 years he and his wife have travelled the world interviewing persecuted Christians and learning from them.

Stories like Dmitri’s also confirm the wisdom and the power of the passage we are going to study this morning (1 Peter 4:12-19). This is a passage that explains how believers are to respond to persecution. If you’re like me, you’ve read passages such as this one and thought, “What does this have to do with us here in Manhattan, Kansas where we have so much freedom and so little opposition?”

First, there is one body of Christ. In many places around the world other members of that one body are being aggressively and violently persecuted; therefore we need to understand how God is calling them to respond. Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.”

Second, even if we don’t experience violent persecution (there are no guarantees that will always be the case), we are still called to cultivate the same type of devotion to Christ that is embodied in the persecuted church: doing the will of God no matter the cost, rejoicing in the midst of suffering, entrusting ourselves to God instead of giving up when things get tough, etc.

Peter makes three basic points about persecution in this passage.

### ***Experience persecution as Christ did. (1 Peter 4:12-16)***

In these five verses Peter describes persecution in a variety of different ways. Peter is not talking about the suffering that is common to humanity (e.g., illness, financial stress,

etc.); he is talking specifically about being mistreated because you are doing the will of God. In verse 12 Peter addresses his readers as “beloved,” reminding them that his comments flow from his love for them (and ultimately God’s love for them):

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

Since we live in a world in rebellion against God, persecution shouldn’t surprise us; it is not some strange (or foreign) thing. After all, Jesus had told Peter and the others, “A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well” (John 15:20). If we think that we have a right to be safe and comfortable, we will never die to self and really follow Jesus, much less suffer persecution well. To the contrary, we will walk around outraged every time we don’t get our way.

One Russian pastor told Ripken, “For us, persecution is like the sun coming up in the east. It happens all the time. It’s the way things are. There is nothing unusual or unexpected about it. Persecution for our faith has always been—and probably always will be—a normal part of life.” (Insanity; ch. 19)

Peter refers to their persecution as “the fiery ordeal among you.” Some have speculated that the persecution of the Roman Emperor Nero was underway; his brutality involved impaling Christians on posts and setting them on fire to give light to major roadways. Most likely Peter is just employing a metaphor for a trial that refines/purifies us. He says that such ordeals come upon us “for [our] testing.” What our enemies mean for evil, God uses for good. God uses persecution to refine believers and to prove that their faith is genuine. Anyone can say that they believe when their circumstances are easy; but when persecution comes, only those with genuine faith cling to God.

Instead of being surprised and dismayed at persecution, Peter says that we should “keep on rejoicing”!

13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

Peter’s first phrase is almost identical to Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:10 about his desire to know Christ “and the power of His resurrection and **the fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death.” To share the sufferings of Christ means that you and Jesus have suffering in common; you both share the same experience; your Christlikeness extends even to the point of suffering as He did.

Because there is always great blessing in being “Christlike,” Peter urges “keep on rejoicing.” Don’t let your suffering squelch your joy. The clear implication is that it’s possible to have joy/satisfaction in God even though your circumstances are painful and difficult. Notice the connection Peter makes between rejoicing in this life during persecution and rejoicing at the return of Christ: “so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.” Our rejoicing now anticipates our rejoicing on that day (which will be magnified - we will “rejoice with exultation)! ”

14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Of course Peter learned this truth the hard way. The night Jesus was arrested, instead of being reviled for the name of Christ, he denied knowing Him. He was spared the insults and reviling that would have come his way; but he also missed the blessedness of the fellowship of Christ's suffering. And so Peter declares here that when we are reviled for the name of Christ, we are blessed "because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us." Peter is probably making an allusion to Isaiah 11:1-2 where it was promised that the Spirit of God would "rest upon" the Messiah. Peter is probably saying that our blessedness is wrapped up in the fact that the same Spirit promised the Messiah rests upon us. The presence of God more than compensates for the pain that comes from any insults and threats we might receive because of our devotion to the name of Christ.

Peter gives a significant qualification in verse 15:

15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

Peter first mentions three types of suffering that are clearly out of bounds: suffering as a murderer or thief or evildoer. Believers may have been falsely accused of these crimes/activities. The fourth term, "meddler," is found only here in the NT; it may be that Peter coined the phrase himself (lit. "one who oversees another"). Peter is warning against "prying into others' affairs" - trying to dictate to others things that are none of your business.

16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

This is one of only three times in the New Testament that believers are called "Christians," the other two being in Acts 11:26 and Acts 26:28. Peter tells us that if we are suffering legitimate hardship due to being "one of Christ's" - a Christian - we shouldn't be ashamed. Rather, we should "glorify God in this name" (i.e., the name of Jesus).

Persecuted Christians would tell us that avoiding persecution is really pretty easy: "First, just leave Jesus alone. Second, if you do happen to find Him, just keep Him to yourself. Persecution stops immediately where there is no faith and where there is no witness. The reason for persecution, then, is that people keep finding Jesus - and, then, they refuse to keep Him to themselves. (Insanity; ch. 33)

***See your present suffering in light of the alternative (the fate of the ungodly). (1 Peter 4:17-18)*** Here Peter would have us put our suffering as believers in the larger

context, the context that includes the eventual suffering of unbelievers when Christ returns.

17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?  
18 And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?

I don't think Peter has changed topics here. He is still talking about persecution - Christians being mistreated by a hostile world. I think Peter is saying that God uses persecution to "judge" the household of God. This is not judgment in the sense of punishment because they are suffering for doing God's will, not for disobeying. God uses persecution in the sense of "rendering a verdict": these are My people; because they have persevered they have proven that they belong to Me." A refrain in the book of Revelation is that "those who persevere to the end will be saved."

Peter asks, "and if [judgment] begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" The outcome will be far worse! Therefore it's better to suffer now for doing what is right than to suffer eternal separation from God for not obeying the gospel.

In verse 18 Peter says that it is "with difficulty" that the righteous is saved. We should take "saved" in its broader sense of salvation: we have been saved (conversion); we are being saved (sanctification); and we will be saved (our salvation will be complete at the return of Christ). The process is full of difficulty. We have to battle against the flesh internally and against the devil and the world externally. It's not an easy journey. If the journey is so difficult for the "righteous" - those who know and love God, Peter says, "imagine what lies ahead for the godless man and the sinner"! J.C. Ryle wrote, "A single day in hell will be worse than a whole lifetime spent carrying the cross" (Holiness, p. 75).

I get the sense that the persecuted church instinctively understands this truth; therefore we shouldn't envy the ungodly (see Psalm 73). Paul sure understood this truth. In Romans 8:18 he wrote that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

***Entrust your soul to your Creator and keep doing His will.*** (1 Peter 4:19) In verse 19 Peter explains what is possible for those who put their own suffering into its proper context (as he has just explained).

19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

The idea is that instead of pulling away from God because of our suffering, we should draw near to Him and entrust our souls to Him. When you entrust something to someone else, you have confidence that the other person can take care of something valuable to you. In other words, you **trust** that person. Peter tells us to trust God to take

care of our souls. Why? Because He is a faithful Creator. He made us and has faithfully taken care of us.

Back in 2:23 Peter wrote of Jesus, “and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.” When Jesus suffered according to the will of God, He entrusted Himself to the Father; He trusted that God would ultimately vindicate Him through the resurrection. This is one more way that we experience the fellowship of His sufferings: we entrust our souls to our Creator.

But how do we do this? How do we express to Him that we trust Him? Peter's answer is “in doing what is right.” Instead of taking the path of least resistance, we continue to do what is right regardless of the consequences, regardless of the fallout.

When Jesus sent out His disciples, He did tell His disciples that they should avoid persecution when possible; He told them that if they persecute you in one city, flee to the next (Matthew 10). Ripken wrote that he and his wife never encountered a mature believer who requested, “Pray that our persecution would cease.” Rather, believers in persecution asked them to pray that “they would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering.” (Insanity; ch. 33) Basically their prayer request was that they would entrust their souls to God and would continue to do good (verse 19).

**Conclusion.** As I mentioned earlier, today's Scripture has at least two points of relevance for us. First, since there is ***one body of Christ***, we need to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted so that we can ***pray for them*** and ***learn from them***. I'm blown away by the wisdom of persecuted believers.

For example, a believer in a house church in China made this comment: “Do you know what prison is for us? It is how we get our theological education. Prison in China is for us like seminary is for training church leaders in your country.” I confirmed this with a Chinese friend; this is a saying among believers in China. The idea is that in prison believers learn to trust God and believe the Scriptures. Some Chinese believers lead others to Christ and plant churches in prison. They come out of prison with a depth of maturity and a practical knowledge of God and His ways; I have no doubt that their experience is more powerful than 99% of seminary experiences in the U.S. There is much we can learn from the persecuted church.

The second point of relevance is that we are called to cultivate the same type of devotion to Christ and His mission that is embodied in the persecuted church. I will leave you with a challenge that an Eastern European believer named Stoyan gave Ripken. Stoyan's father had been imprisoned and tortured after WWII. Stoyan said:

“Don't ever give up in freedom what we would never have given up in persecution! That is our witness to the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ!”

We have this amazing freedom to seek God, to speak the name of Jesus, and to share the gospel with family and friends and others that God brings our way. If our brothers

and sisters in Christ are good stewards of the gospel in persecution, how dare we not be good stewards of the gospel in our freedom. I don't know what this might mean for you; I don't even know what it might mean for me. But I do know that God has my attention. Does He have yours?