

Dear Friends,

Through much of Christian history (Since the first century), Christians have lived under one degree or another of persecution. We in this country have escaped that cross. Despite the blessing, perhaps we have become soft in our convictions and our faith because of this. We might consider 1 Peter as a wise caution not to become too complacent in our present state. Whatever liberties we enjoy, the lesson of history warns that they are often short-lived. Should the time come in our generation when we face persecution for our faith, we need to devote much time in our study of 1 Peter. In fact, should we enjoy our present liberty till we complete our journey, 1 Peter reminds us of our pilgrim status in this world. Should that day come, our godly response is set forth in 1 Peter, not in our macho ego. Lord help us to learn the kind grace of godliness that Peter teaches us well.

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## 1 Peter

*Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: (1 Peter 1:6-8 KJV)*

Peter wrote this letter to believers living in five provinces located in the north central region of modern Turkey. It might seem odd to contemporary readers that Peter addressed this letter to “*the strangers scattered throughout*” those five provinces. Why refer to them as “*strangers*”? First, every believer who fully embraces Jesus and the faith of Him and His teachings de facto has “*confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*” (Hebrews 11:13b KJV) As the message of 1 Peter unfolds, we see a powerful reminder of this “Pilgrim” status through the dominant theme of suffering as a Christian. Peter’s reference to “*manifold temptations*” contextually, based on the theme of the letter, is a reference to the testing these Christians endured because they suffered as a Christian. (1 Peter 4:16 KJV) Whether persecuted or not, children of God hold primary citizenship in heaven. Citizenship in any earthly country is secondary to our primary home in heaven. Would that believers of our time would live that priority. Rightly viewed, to suffer persecution because of their faith in Jesus would only further underscore that truth, Peter’s goal in the letter.

Most New Testament letters or books are thematic. They focus on a specific theme, issue, or doctrine. I recall many years ago a friend made a startling comment to me, “If we want to study the Bible doctrine of hell, the best place to study it is in the words of Jesus. He said more about it than any other portion of Scripture. If you want to study suffering, especially suffering as a Christian, study 1 Peter.” He got my attention, but, after pondering his words, I had to agree. We need not suffer persecution for our faith; the very determination to conduct our lives by the faithful example of Jesus will bring pressures and trials our way, making 1 Peter an instructive and encouraging resource for our study.

Peter likely wrote this letter in the sixties AD, so his reference to persecution would refer to sufferings in that time frame. Based on a reference in a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, dated 112 AD, Pliny, Roman governor of the province of Bythnia, one of the five provinces Peter names in his introduction, we learn that Pliny was executing people for their faith in Jesus. Trajan replied with his approval, but with instructions that, if these Christians would renounce Jesus and worship the Roman gods, they should be set free. Peter sought to strengthen his first readers against a long and steady onslaught of fierce persecution. How would we react to such persecution?

The first five verses highlight the eternal blessings and security the Lord has provided for His beloved people. The comfort that flows like a river from those verses is seldom matched in human language. By

beginning immediately after his brief introduction with this theme, Peter reminds his first readers—and us—that what we have in Jesus far exceeds anything we could imagine in this world, good or bad. He also reminded them—and us—that holding to this treasure from the Lord is to be our highest priority, despite the fiercest trials we might face in life.

Clearly these Christians were living their faith, even in the face of death for simply confessing and holding fast to Jesus. Their suffering as a Christian was not merely demeaning criticism, but torture and cruel death because they refused to abandon Jesus and His way of living. In the reference above to 1 Peter 4:16, the context highlights lifestyles that people may choose. In the verses leading up to Verse 16, Peter exhorts his readers not to ever suffer “...as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters.” Wicked people can do any number of sinful things and seldom draw a critical word from other people. However, if a professed believer does those same things, our adversary will shout that conduct from the rooftops and highlight the hypocrisy. The wicked person may not suffer at all for his conduct (Now, though he shall surely face the Lord in the final judgment). But the professing Christian who commits those sins will, at least, suffer the scorn of critics of the faith of Jesus, as well as the chastening of the Lord.

In these four sins, Peter covers a broad span of conduct. On the first side, he identifies murder. I believe Peter intended the literal taking of a human life. On the other side, he reminds us not to suffer as a busybody. Commentaries variously describe “*busybody*” as being meddlesome or involving themselves in other people’s lives in an intrusive or unwarranted manner. John takes this sinful idea to a high ethical plane.

*Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15 KJV)*

At first thought, we might think there is a world of difference between murder and meddlesomeness. Often the meddlesome person intrudes excessively into your personal life on the pretense of caring, but their broadcasting the information to all who will hear often takes on a judgmental put-down tone. To “hate” one’s brother means to do things that are injurious to that person. John takes the point to its Biblical objective. To condone any form of hateful or injurious conduct, including words, against another believer John equates with murder!

There is only one way we can avoid suffering for these four sins. Order our lives not to commit them. Persecution can impose powerful discouragements onto believers.

In the context of 1 Peter 4:16, we read a lesson that naïve Christians often wrest from its context with an interpretation not at all agreeable with its context.

*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? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? 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. (1 Peter 4:17-19 KJV)*

The context of these verses is suffering, either as a Christian or as a sinner. Believers who compromise their faith for any reason, persecution or a desire to fit into a cultural group, whatever, lose their sense of Biblical judgment. They shall continue to face the stresses and difficulties of their “Pilgrim status,” but they are often confused about the reasons for their suffering. Peter’s intent in this context is to remind all believers of a vital function the Lord vested in His church. Consider. Two believers sit together in church. One believer has compromised his faith and is suffering the Lord’s chastening because of his failure. The other believer has faithfully withstood the trials or persecution, but he has suffered because of his faithfulness. The response of each person to the gospel and to other believers in the setting of “*the house of God*” shall be obvious to those in the church. And perhaps more to Peter’s point, in the setting of “*the house of God*,” the erring believer will be nudged by the Spirit’s conviction to repent, while the faithful believer will be encouraged and strengthened in his faith.

The common non-contextual interpretation of this lesson necessarily implies that the sufferings and death of Jesus for our sins, “scarcely” accomplished our eternal salvation, not at all a Biblical truth. This lesson teaches that the Lord has endowed His church with wisdom to discern the difference. Those two believers seated in church both suffer, one in righteousness and the other for his sins. With the Lord’s guiding and wise grace, the church will know the difference. And the Lord will encourage the faithful believer

in church, while He will chasten the compromised believer. Contextually, this is the judgment that begins at the house of God. Peter made no mention of the final judgment that shall begin at the “Great White Throne.”

Peter’s conclusion to this lesson is highly instructive. We do not suffer because the Lord ordained our persecution. Faithful believers endured suffering in a godly manner that followed the will of God. They did the right thing. They stood firm under pressure. But they continue to suffer. What should they do? Peter answers the question. “...commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.” Remain steadfast in the faith and trust the Lord to be as He has promised He shall ever be to His people and to His promises to us. He is faithful; **He can only be faithful.** He created you a new creature in Christ, and He shall keep you faithfully in His love and give you the grace to endure your trials. In fact, much of 1 Peter is devoted to teaching us how to “Suffer as a Christian.” How do we do it? First, we keep our hearts and minds focused on our God and His secure provisions for us, those first verses in the letter that direct us to our eternal security and amazing blessings in Jesus. Second, we keep our life energy and activity focused on living our lives, including dealing with intense pressures and trials, “...according to the will of God.” Accordingly, Peter devotes much of this letter to remind believers to live their lives in keeping with the Lord’s will and teachings. Husbands, wives, old believers, young believers, even ministers of the gospel (“elders”), the Lord’s teachings regarding how believers are taught in Scripture to conduct their lives; we do not have two Biblical paths to choose. The Lord teaches us to live our lives according to His will, regardless the circumstances or trials we face.

In the early verses of Chapter 4, Peter wraps up a major theme that serves as a godly compass to keep us oriented to the Lord and His will.

*Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. (1 Peter 4:1-2 KJV)*

When we encounter the pressures or difficulties of life, how do we respond? Our carnal inclination is always to wholly ignore Scripture and follow our emotions. And we are surprised that this path never turns out well? How does Peter teach us to respond? We suffer unfairly. So? Was Jesus’ sufferings “Fair”? How did He respond? He is our example. When we ignore Jesus’ example and teaching, we create more problems and spiritual confusion for ourselves. When we respond in Jesus’ example, we regard the suffering as a refining fire to improve our spiritual maturity and fellowship with Jesus.

Notice Peter’s use of “**the will of God**” in this lesson. We “*should live the rest*” of our time in this world (Time after we face trials and suffering for our faith), not according to our personal opinions and ideas, but rather submit to the Lord and actively conduct our lives according “**to the will of God.**”

How goes it, Pilgrim? Stay the course. Never compromise or abandon the will of God in your life choices and conduct.

Elder Joe Holder