

Sermon: “Don’t Be Surprised When You Suffer for Christ, But Rejoice!” (1 Peter 4:12-19)¹

Jarvis J. Williams

Jarvis J. Williams is the associate professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from where he earned his Ph.D. in New Testament. Dr. Williams is the author of *Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul’s Theology of Atonement* (Wipf & Stock, 2010), *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (B&H Academic, 2010), *For Whom Did Christ Die: The Extent of the Atonement in Paul’s Theology* (Paternoster, 2012), and has published articles in the *Princeton Theological Review* and in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. Dr. Williams also preaches often in churches and conferences throughout the country. He is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the Institute for Biblical Research, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Introduction

I want to highlight four truths from this text. First, don’t be surprised when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (v. 12). Second, rejoice, and glorify God when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 13-14). Third, don’t be ashamed to suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 15-18). Fourth, trust God when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (v. 19). In order to understand vv. 12-19, I will first discuss two introductory points about the context of our text.

1. Context of 1 Peter 4:12-19.

First, in my view, Peter wrote this letter to exhort Christians who suffered for

their faith in Jesus Christ to be holy and to hope in God as they suffered for their faith in Christ. For example, in 1:6-7, Peter states that these Christians should rejoice although they suffer “various trials” so that their faith would be tested (i.e., refined) and proven to be real at the revelation of Jesus Christ. In 1:13, he exhorts them to hope in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, grace that will be offered to them when Jesus returns (see also 1:13-16). In 2:18-25, he exhorts Christian slaves to endure their suffering at the hands of both unjust masters and just masters in a manner that honors Christ. In 3:14, Peter exhorts these Christians not to fear their oppressors if they suffer for righteousness (i.e., if they suffer as a Christian). Finally, in 4:12-19, Peter exhorts these Christians to honor Christ even if they are insulted, reviled, and ridiculed for their Christian faith. Thus, in my view, Peter wrote this letter to exhort Christians who suffered for their faith in Jesus to be holy and to hope (i.e., trust/wait) for their salvation in Christ as they suffered for Christ.

Second, Peter grounds his exhortations to be holy and to hope in God and God’s sovereign work of salvation in Christ. For example, in 1:1-2, Peter calls these Christians, scattered throughout Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia, Galatia, and Bithynia, elect (chosen by God) in accordance with his foreknowledge (i.e., in accordance with his covenantal love that he chose to place on them before the foundation of the world). In 1:2, Peter further states that these Christians are the people of God when he refers to their conversion with the words elect by the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience and for sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ.

In 1:3-5, Peter further explains to his audience that they are the people of God by emphasizing that God himself reached down from heaven and supernaturally invaded their lives by causing them to be born again to a living hope according to his great mercy by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead unto an incorruptible, unfading, and undefiled inheritance, which is being kept in heaven for them, who are being kept by the power of God for an eschatological salvation that has invaded this present evil age and that will be revealed on the last day. Then, Peter says, in verses 6-12, although they suffered various trials in this life, they should rejoice, because they would receive the goal of their faith, namely, the salvation of their souls. Their suffering was a means by which their future salvation would be realized. Based on Peter’s brief doxology about God’s sovereign work of salvation on behalf of his people in 1:3-12, Peter then exhorts these Christians in 1:13 until the end of the letter to be holy as they suffering for their faith in Christ. Therefore, before we consider 4:12-19, we must remind ourselves that Peter grounds his gospel imperatives to be holy and to hope in the gos-

pel indicatives of God's sovereign work of salvation in the lives of his people who were suffering for their faith in Christ. This reminder takes me to my first point from 4:12-19.

2. Exposition of 1 Peter 4:12-19.

First, don't be surprised when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (v. 12).

Don't be surprised by the fiery trial (12): Peter begins verse 12 by exhorting his audience not to be surprised/shocked by this fiery trial that has come upon them as though something strange/foreign has come upon them. The fiery trial refers to suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ. More specifically, it refers to suffering insults, revilements, and social ostracism from the society in which these Christians lived, because Peter states in verse 14 that these Christians are blessed if they are reviled/insulted for the name of Jesus. This latter point is supported elsewhere in 1 Peter (e.g. 1 Pet 2:12, 18-25; 3:14).

Peter calls this trial "fiery" because he associates it with God's chastening or judgment of his people for the sake of purifying their faith. In 1 Peter 1:7, Peter refers to the suffering of these Christians with an analogy of gold being refined through fire. He asserts in 1:7 that their tested faith, which (tested faith) is more precious than gold refined by fire, would be proven to be real when Jesus returns. Furthermore, in 4:17-18, Peter associates this fiery trial with God's judgment/chastening of his people when he states that judgment begins with God's people at God's house first and that the righteous will be saved by means of difficulty (i.e., by means of suffering). In 4:19, he declares that it is God's will for Christians to suffer. Consequently, if we read 1:7 beside of 4:12-19, we can infer that God brings the fiery trial of suffering for faith in Jesus Christ upon these Christians through evil antagonists of the Christian faith to be a means by which he keeps them in order to strengthen the faith of these Christians so that they will be saved from God's eschatological wrath when Jesus returns.

Second, rejoice when you suffer for your faith in Jesus (vv. 13-14).

The tension between suffering and joy (13): This verse introduces us to one of the many tensions of the Christian faith: namely, the tension of joy co-existing with suffering. Peter says if "you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (by which I think he mentions you suffer for righteousness as a Christian), "then rejoice." I do not expect Peter to say "rejoice" when you suffer! Honestly, in light of verse 12, verse 13 comes as a shock to me since Christians who heard this exhortation and who have read this exhortation throughout history have suffered severely.

Nevertheless, Peter's exhortation to rejoice is not a contradiction, but it is an exhortation to hope in God's promise of eschatological salvation. That is, he is exhorting these Christians to look to the eschatological salvation for which they have been saved and which God will reveal to them on the last day when Jesus returns. In the midst of the certainty of their suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ, Peter reminds these Christians of the certainty of their future salvation, which has invaded this present evil age. This interpretation seems right for the following reasons. First, in the first half of verse 13, Peter says "but to the degree that you share/participate in the sufferings of Christ, you rejoice!" In the second half of verse 13, he gives the reason for the command: "so that at the revelation of his glory" (i.e., at the second coming) "you may rejoice with much exultation." Second, in 1:6-9, Peter exhorts these Christians to hope in their various trials in this life because their suffering is a means by which they will inherit future salvation. Finally, in 1:13, Peter exhorts these Christians to hope in their salvation that God will give to them when Jesus returns. Therefore, in 4:13, Peter exhorts these Christians to hope in the certainty of God's eschatological salvation in the midst of the shame and dishonor that their persecutors brought upon them for their faith. Instead of being ashamed of suffering for Jesus, they should rejoice because they will be saved from their suffering and from God's wrath when Jesus returns since they are the people of God.

The Spirit of God and of glory rests upon those who suffer (v. 14): I think that verse 14 further supports the preceding interpretation. The Spirit rests upon the people of God in 1 Peter. In 1:2, Peter states that these Christians have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit: i.e. they have been converted. Thus, Peter's point in 4:14 seems to be that when Christians suffer for their faith in Christ, this particular suffering proves that they have the Spirit, it proves that they are the people of God, and their suffering for Christ proves that they will be saved on the last day when Jesus returns. Therefore, Christians should rejoice (i.e., hope in Christ's salvation) when they suffer, because we are indeed blessed by God.

Third, don't be ashamed when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 15-18).

In verses 15-18, Peter further explains the argument that he's been making in verses 12-14. Namely, in verses 12-14, the argument is don't be shocked/surprised when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ as though this is a strange thing. But rejoice now when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ, so that you will rejoice on the last day when Jesus returns in his glory, be-

cause if you suffer for your faith in Christ, then such suffering proves that you are converted. In verse 15, Peter now says be ashamed to suffer for unrighteousness because that kind of suffering brings dishonor in God's eschatological law-court. There is no honor when one suffers as a murderer or as a thief or as a busy-body or as an evil-doer, for these acts bring shame in society and in God's eschatological law-court (v. 15). But Christians should not be ashamed to suffer as a Christian (i.e. for their faith in Jesus Christ) because suffering for Christ brings honor in God's eschatological law-court although it brings shame in this life. Christians should, nevertheless, glorify God by suffering for the name of Jesus Christ when non-Christians dishonor and shame them for their faith in Christ. In v. 16, the command to glorify God by the name of Christ is another way of talking about hoping in God (cf. 1:13) and trusting God (cf. v. 19).

In verse 17-18, with an appeal to Proverbs 11:31 from the Septuagint (LXX), Peter specifically offers a reason why Christians should not be ashamed to suffer for their faith in Christ. Namely, God judges his people in the current evil age by means of suffering via evil opponents of the Christian faith (v. 17). In v. 18, he confirms this interpretation by asserting that the righteous (i.e., Christians [v. 16]) will be saved by means of difficulty, whereas the ungodly and the sinner (i.e., the non-Christian) will experience God's eschatological wrath (vv. 17-18). Although vv. 17-18 do not explicitly state the latter point, the context supports it since Peter has emphasized throughout the letter up to 4:18 that Christians are the people of God and that they will be saved from God's future wrath. The implication of 4:17-18 is that non-Christians will not escape God's wrath since they reject Christ, which they demonstrate by persecuting Christians.

Fourth, trust God when you suffer for Christ (v. 19).

Peter concludes 4:12-19 with v. 19 by exhorting these Christians to trust God when they suffer in accordance with his will (i.e., when they suffer for righteousness as Christians) as they live righteously.

3. Nine Points of Application.

1. Don't be shocked when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ. For those of you training for pastoral or serving in pastoral ministry, don't be shocked when your deacons leave your church because they don't like your interpretation of a particular text or your leadership style. Don't be shocked when you receive opposition from those whom you serve. For those of you training to be missionaries or serving currently on the mission field, don't be shocked if you experience severe loneliness and

discouragement or maybe even very few converts throughout your ministry on the mission field. For those of you training to be scholars, don't be shocked if at some point in your academic ministries, you find yourselves in a massive theological controversy. And don't be shocked when the people whom you thought would stand with you and support you do not. Don't be shocked when you suffer precisely because of your faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

2. Trust God when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ, because your suffering for your faith in Jesus Christ proves that you are trusting in Jesus Christ, proves that you have the Spirit, and proves that you will be saved from God's eschatological wrath on the last day (1:6-10; 2:13; 4:17-19).
3. If you grow weak in your faith when you suffer for your faith, ask the Lord to use your suffering for his name's sake to serve as a means by which he keeps you in the faith until the end.
4. When you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ, ask the Lord to use your suffering to evangelize the lost. A powerful testimony to the Lord's faithfulness in suffering can serve as a means by which he converts his elect through your ministry.
5. Be willing to identify with and to help fellow Christians who suffer for their faith in Jesus Christ, and be willing to look for ways to minister to the fellow sufferers in the gospel in your churches. There are people in our churches for whom every day that they follow Jesus is a difficult day, because they suffer severely in a marriage, at a job, at a school, or in a community because they have faith in Jesus. Minister with tenderness and with pastoral care to those who suffer in your churches. This is a good ministry, but it is hard for some of us to identify with, to suffer with, and to minister to Christians who suffer in our churches because too many of us only want to associate ourselves with rock star Christians. I would venture to guess that not one of us (including me) naturally thinks about how we can identify with, minister to, and help Christians who suffer for their faith in Jesus Christ. Not one of us naturally wakes up thinking about how we can pray for and minister to Christians who suffer in our own churches! No matter how great or how small your ministries become, don't forget about Christians who suffer for their faith in Christ. Don't forget about brothers and sisters who continue to suffer many racial injustices in both church and society because of racism. Don't forget about those brothers and sisters in your churches who can't have kids. Don't forget about those brothers and sisters in your churches who are dying with cancer, who are widows or widowers, or whose kids are re-

bellious against the gospel. Don't forget about those for whom every day they follow Jesus is difficult. Don't forget about the millions of racially and socially marginalized people in our communities throughout the United States and throughout the world that need to hear of the saving power of the gospel.

6. Suffering for the gospel is an honor.
7. Ask God to give you the courage to be willing to suffer for your faith in Jesus if he calls you to do so.
8. Suffer for Jesus with godliness but not with silence. If you're suffering for your faith in Jesus today because of injustice, let your brothers and sisters who can help you know. Suffering righteously for Jesus doesn't necessarily mean suffering silently.
9. Pray for your enemies because God will judge them. The certainty of God's eschatological salvation of his people and the certainty of God's eschatological wrath for unbelievers should free us from hating our enemies and should move us to pray for them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, brothers and sisters: don't be surprised when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (v. 12). Rejoice when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 13-14). Don't be ashamed to suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 16-18). Trust God when you suffer for your faith in Jesus Christ (v. 19). Amen!

¹ This sermon was originally preached during a chapel service on February 20, 2014 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from 1 Peter are mine.