

## Living for God in difficult times

(Part 3)

### 1 Peter 3

#### Preface

In our previous two volumes on the first two chapters of 1 Peter we have seen Peter bring encouragement and instruction to Christian believers who were undergoing persecution and stress. Peter has done this very carefully reminding the believer of his privileged position. We are a chosen people, loved by God and precious to him. Nothing can separate us from him, and he has a place reserved in heaven for us. Peter has applied the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ to the many different aspects of the believer's life while we still face difficult times, because there needs to be a consistent godliness characterising the believer at all times. For example, Peter has written about our position in society at large, our position in the Church and our relationship with governments and rulers and employers. He continues to do that as he begins chapter three and this book will consider what Peter wrote.

Again I am indebted to Howard Sayers for the valuable work he has done in preparing the *Sound Words* series of radio programmes this book is based on. Howard's pastoral experience shines through again and again as he applies the Word of God to us today.

It is our prayer that the Lord will use this book to strengthen and equip you to live for him in every area of

your life in spite of the opposition and difficulties you may be facing.

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### Chapter 1 - Instruction to husbands and wives (part 1) 3:1-7

#### Introduction

Peter has laid down a principle in 1 Peter 2:11-12,

*“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”*

Christian believers, those who make up the Church of Jesus Christ, are strangers and pilgrims in the world and are to abstain from sinful lusts and to live honourable lives for the glory of God.

An area of life where this has a tremendous impact is in family life and relationships. Peter therefore touches on the most intimate of all relationships, that of husbands and wives. Now at first glance it may seem that the Scriptures are unbalanced here with six verses being devoted to the wives and just one to the husband. Indeed that is a common feature of the Bible in this area of life. It will

help us to have a number of facts in our minds to aid us with this. First, there are often more women than men in many churches. Part of the reason for this is that often women and children are more easily reached with the Gospel and are thus statistically more likely to be converted. Second, some wives have sought to avoid their subjective role in the marriage relationship. Where that has happened it has always brought sadness. A prime example of that is seen in the actions of Eve in Genesis 3. Third, where the Gospel is despised women are downtrodden and will naturally rebel. Under the Gospel they are highly valued and elevated. This is part of the reason why Peter devotes the larger part of this section of his letter to teaching for wives in general, and believing wives in particular.

We need also to take note that tensions in marriage relationships because of the faith are not uncommon, although they may be little talked about by reason of their nature. Note also that Peter is bringing us the principles which the believing wife needs to apply to her life, and in our next chapter we will see the enormous responsibility he placed on husbands.

### 1) The duty of the wife to her husband. 1 Peter 3:1

*“Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives...”*

Peter is specifically speaking to those who are married to a man according to God’s plan for society (Genesis 2:24-25). All wives have been given to a man by God to be his suitable helper. To be such a wife is a great honour when seen like this. Peter wrote *“in the same way...”* That is, wives are to be just like servants who are to be subject to their masters (see 2:18). The tense he used when he wrote, *“...be in subjection,”* means to allow yourself to be subject. Allow your husband to be in charge.

We need to note also that Peter emphasises *“...to your husbands...”* Wives are not to be subject to another man other than their **own** husband. They are to be devoted to him and him alone. Depart from this and distrust etc. soon arises and brings with it many associated problems. Sadly we live at a time when marriage is under attack all around the world. The rate of divorce has reached epidemic proportions so the Christian believer needs to make sure they are faithful in their marriage relationship and obedient to this instruction from the Lord. It is easy for a husband to mistrust his wife when she becomes answerable to another man. Equally, when another man has authority over a woman other than his wife there is room for mistrust in the heart of his own wife.

### 2) A good reason for the Christian wife to fulfil her responsibility in this way. 1 Peter 3:1

Peter, with his pastor’s heart, gives a most helpful word of encouragement for the Christian wife especially if she has

an unbelieving, maybe even persecuting, husband. A Christian wife's relationship with her husband may win him for the Lord even when she cannot speak openly about the Saviour to him. There are many ways to evangelise but a very powerful way in the home is *Christian example*, a principle which extends beyond husbands and wives of course!

There have been many unbelieving husbands who have been caused to think about spiritual things seriously simply because of the loving way their believing wives have behaved themselves in the home. Sometimes, even those who have forbidden their wives to speak about Jesus have been forced to ask them, 'Why do you behave in this way?' Their light had shone before their husbands and their husbands' hearts were softened and made more open to the good news about Jesus. When a wife submits to her husband love and respect for him is declared, and that is something every husband likes to be told and know. Remembering Ephesians 5:32 the Gospel is actually preached to your loved one when you follow Peter's instructions. In addition, the husband is encouraged to fulfil his role in the relationship as he is honoured (3:7). Above all you are honouring our Lord and the Master is glorified.

### **3) How to go about this responsibility using Sarah as an example. 1 Peter 3:2-6**

*"...when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment,*

*such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewellery and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear."*

The unbelieving husband will observe the way his wife is behaving and he will be unable to do other than take notice of his wife. He may not take notice of the Word of God the Bible, but his wife is a practical Bible before him constantly. We may be the only Bible that others will read. We are to be living letters read by all men (2 Corinthians 3:2). This is challenging for every believer. What message are we conveying to others by our conduct?

Returning to wives, Peter speaks about their purity and reverence. This is a way of life that does not seek to draw attention to itself. The whole way of life is marked by purity and wholesomeness – morally, physically and spiritually. It is shown by an inward, secret beauty rather than outward show (3:3-4) and is incorruptible. This beauty is not influenced by anything. It does not change with the fashions of the day or alter with the attitude and behaviour of the husband. It consists of a gentle and quiet (unassuming) spirit (attitude). Thinking of a bride in many cultures, no one can see her face as it is underneath a veil,

signifying that she is for her husband alone. We read of a bride adorned for her husband; she is not adorned for anyone else. Such a godly or reverent wife recognises and submits to God's order and plan for the wife and her husband. This word reverence (sometimes translated 'fear') is indicative of a high respect and regard. In this context it may be taken in respect of God or of the husband, and we are probably intended to say both. Remember the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It moves us to live for the glory of God and according to his Word and lies behind any change of attitude in a person. For example, we were going astray in this matter but now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (2:25). The fear of God will promote a godly respect and reverence between husbands and wives, and in our setting by the wife towards her husband.

**This does not mean that women are to be crushed or downtrodden by their husbands.** We shall see this when we view the husband's role in the relationship (3:7). But it raises the question, 'What happens in a persecuting situation?' How is the believing wife to behave then? This was the situation facing Peter's first readers. This was the difficulty under which they were called to live for God.

The subjection is to be in line with the creation ordinances and Peter gives Sarah as an example. We readily agree that in some situations Sarah was a bad example (Genesis 20:16) but in the instance Peter refers to in particular she is an excellent example (Genesis 18:12). She submitted

herself not only to God in faith but physically to her husband in order for Isaac to be conceived, all against her natural instincts of her age and condition. We know that she was a beautiful woman physically (Genesis 13:14), even into old age (she was virtually 100 yrs old in Genesis 20). She is, however, remembered not for that but for her spiritual beauty as a woman of faith (Hebrews 11:11.). Other great women are magnificent examples for our own day just as in Peter's day. Think of Ruth, Hannah and Esther. These were no doubt some of the holy women Peter has in mind. Think too of the warnings implicit in Rebekah and Deborah. They were good women but are a warning of what happens if roles are reversed. Worse examples still are the wicked women recorded in the Bible such as Jezebel and Athaliah.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible is not against women. This is a passage that exalts womanhood by giving women dignity, status and purpose. It is also something that men are to recognise in their turn and brings a heavy responsibility on them, as we shall see in our next chapter.

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### **Chapter 2 - Instruction to husbands and wives (part 2) 3:1-7**

#### **Introduction**

Peter has laid down a principle in 2:11-12 which applies to all believers all of the time. Christian believers, who are the Church of Jesus Christ, are to be seen to be abstaining from sinful lusts and living honourable lives for the glory

of God. We have seen how living for the glory of God in the marriage bond applies to wives in verses 1 to 6, and now Peter makes the same application of the principle to Christian husbands. Although only one verse is before us (1 Peter 3:7), it contains a great deal of teaching as it describes the husband's role in the family. We examine just what this means in practice bearing in mind that he may be married to an unbelieving wife.

1 Peter 3:7 *“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.”*

Peter says to believing husbands to behave “...in the same way...” That is, to copy Abraham's example, as he was lord over Sarah as outlined in verse 6. The use of the term ‘master’ or ‘lord’ is one that has been misunderstood and has led some husbands into thinking they are to act like tyrants over their wives. This is totally wrong, as we shall see, so we need to proceed with care lest we make the same sinful mistake. What Peter is saying becomes clearer to us when we consider the various sections of verse 7. There are three main points and the fourth is an important factor that should encourage husbands to follow Peter's instructions.

### 1) Live with them.

This is a simple phrase that is self-explanatory. Husbands are to live ***with*** their wives. This takes us back to when God instituted marriage in Genesis 2:14 where a man is told to leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. It is not right for husbands and wives normally to live apart from one another. It is only when they are together that the man can exercise his headship and the woman her supporting role, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually.

We may well want to ask, ‘How are husbands to live with their wives? Is there a particular manner which is to characterise them in the home?’ Peter's answer is ‘Yes, there is a precise way that husbands are to follow.’ Christian husbands are to be “...considerate...” as they live with their wives. That is with understanding, or according to knowledge. Each believing husband is to be aware not only of his own strengths and weaknesses, but also those of his wife. He is to treat her accordingly, seeking to help and support and encourage her as much as he can physically, emotionally and spiritually. He is not only to know these things but he is to take the lead in carrying them all out.

### 2) Honour them.

#### a. Respect.

Peter wrote “...*treat them with respect...*” This means husbands are to treat their wives with dignity and esteem. Indeed, there are specific reasons why wives are to be treated in this way.

They are worthy of respect because a wife is God's gift to her husband (see Genesis 2:22). Without his wife a man cannot fully carry out his God-given role in life. Therefore he should be grateful to God and honour her.

A man's wife is his helper and supporter through life as he seeks to serve the Lord at home and work, in the family and the church. She knows him more intimately than anyone else by reason of their relationship. She fulfils her marriage vows to love him, obey him, comfort him, honour and keep him. Therefore each good husband will honour and respect such a wife by keeping his side of the vows to do the same from the head's perspective.

A man's wife is part of her husband. They are one. Ephesians 5:31 *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."* (See too Ephesians 5:28-29)

God has entrusted her to him to be cared for and loved for the term of her life here on this earth, for marriage is until death parts them (see Romans 7:1-3).

#### **b. Respect as the weaker partner.**

Peter mentions a specific matter that should help husbands to honour their wives, as they should. He wrote, *"...treat them with respect as the weaker partner..."* Now this is a description which sadly some have hated and even tried to change and others have abused. We must always

remember this is the Word of God, and therefore its truth is to be loved and received by faith. God says the wife is the weaker partner. Again we need to be clear that Peter is not teaching that women are inferior to men. This is not to be an excuse for unscrupulous husbands to abuse or ill-treat or despise their wives. That is not so, and we shall see a little later that the equality between the husband and wife in the marriage relationship is something Peter will emphasise.

The Greek word translated '*partner*' is actually the word for 'vessel' which was a common Greek expression used in connection with the body as the container of the soul. Some have suggested it also may be an expression conveying the thought that she is to be the container of his children. If she is a Christian believer she is a vessel of mercy like him, the recipient of God's love, grace and pardon through Jesus Christ. This makes her the container of God's goodness as far as the husband is concerned. It's a word that brings out the idea of being a container of something precious.

But in what way are we to consider the wife as a weaker partner?

This does not mean that men are necessarily strong. Robert Leighton has written, *"...the woman is not called simply weak, but the weaker, and the husband who is generally, by nature's advantage, or should be, the stronger, yet is weak too; for both are vessels of earth, and therefore frail; both polluted with sin, and therefore*

*subject to a multitude of sinful follies and frailties.” To this we can add the comment of C & N Ellis, “...each of us is completely dependent upon the strength of God.”*

Having said all that, it is evident that when God made humankind he did make man and woman quite different in many ways. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that in general terms the woman is often weaker physically; she is not so strong as the man. Also emotionally women are very different to men and are often much more sensitive which is a lovely quality that needs to be protected. This should cause every Christian husband to treat his wife with tenderness and care, and where possible to shield his wife from the pressures and hurts of living in a sinful world, to act as her protector. And this also applies to the spiritual realm. Someone has said that every believing husband should consider his wife as a lovely flower garden with many tender plants in it that need careful and loving cultivation. He should nourish his wife’s spiritual life as they share the things of God together in conversation, in prayer and in the reading of the Bible so that she may blossom spiritually with the graces and fruits of the Holy Spirit.

### **3) Treat them as equals**

Husbands need to remember that their believing wives are also “...heirs with you of the gracious gift of life...” This applies in particular to the special grace of Spiritual life. We cannot give ourselves life; it is of the gift of God to us. (See Romans 6:23; John 10:28.) Not one of us is better

than another in any respect. We are equals in God’s sight and should be in our own. Women experience the saving grace of God on equal terms with men (see Galatians 3:28). Both men and women are saved in one way, by God’s grace (see Ephesians 2:8). Both men and women must turn to God in repentance and have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Acts 20:21). Another passage which brings out this spiritual equality between the sexes and between races is Galatians 3:26-29. *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

**The differences between husbands and wives have to do with the roles God has created men and women to fulfil. The man is made to rule, the woman to support the man (see also 1 Corinthians 11).**

### **4) Prayer is assisted in such a relationship**

Peter wrote that husbands should lovingly care for their wives in this way “...so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Inconsistency in life inevitably results in inconsistency spiritually. Consider the principles of 1 John 4:20 to guide us here: *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”* So we can paraphrase Peter’s

teaching in this way, *“If we cannot relate to one another within marriage, with those we are intimate with here on earth, how can we relate to God whom we have not seen?”* Our prayer life personally, in the home, is affected by our husband/wife relationship. We are not in harmony with God if we abuse our roles and relationship in any way. Peter is quite blunt. Failure on our part will hinder our prayers.

(Questions to think about: Is this a reason behind the shallow Christian life of today? We are not living in our relationship with the opposite sex, as we should?)

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### **Chapter 3 – Relationships between believers 3:8-12**

#### **Introduction**

Having reminded his readers of the way in which husbands and wives should relate to one another Peter closes this section by pointing out how Christians – church members in particular – should relate to each other.

Remember the situation these believers were facing was one of persecution for the Gospel, and therefore inevitably one of great tension all round. Many unbelievers openly opposed the Lord’s people, and it was a very difficult time for the Church of God and often resulted in physical violence and abuse, and for some Christians death. In many homes there was tension and pressure between those who followed Christ and those who did not. The same thing was found between servants and masters (1 Peter

2:18-25) etc. There were certain individuals who were very unpleasant to the disciples of Christ.

In the verses under consideration now, Peter teaches us that there should never be such tensions and pressures amongst Christians generally, and much less within the local church to which we belong. Remember that the world will do all it can to stir up trouble between believers. If followers of Jesus are opposed to each other their testimony is weakened and even destroyed from within. Such strong divisions and hostility will be far more effective in hindering the spread of the gospel than any opposition from without. Therefore Peter takes great care to show us how we are to relate to one another.

#### **1) Christians are to be united. 1 Peter 3:8-9**

Consider this old saying, *‘united we stand, divided we fall.’* It is a principle that carries over into the Christian life and the Church, particularly when we are under pressure and persecution. So Peter begins by telling us in v8 *“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another...”* This is a simple phrase that indicates unity of thought which develops into unity of word and action. Note Peter’s emphasis on *“all of you”* meaning there is to be no exception. Every Christian believer in every age and in every part of the world should live harmoniously with all other fellow-believers. If we do not behave in this way then we are causing trouble in the family of believers, we are marring our testimony to the world, and above all we are grieving and dishonouring the Lord.

This raises the question, how is this unity to be seen in everyday life for the believer? True unity begins with an attitude of mind and heart towards others. Peter lists several things. *'Be sympathetic'* v 8 – Christian people are to show sympathy towards each other in all our different circumstances and situations. They are a body and when one member suffers the other believers are to feel it. (See 1 Corinthians 12:26.)

*'Love as brothers'* v 8 – Literally we are to love as those who come from the same womb. We have a common origin. We have come about and come together in the same way. It is the result of God's gracious activity in our hearts and lives. There is an unbreakable bond between us as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a lovely Old Testament example of this in the case of David and his friend and spiritual brother Jonathan. They had a deep love for each other (1 Samuel 18:1-3) and a complete trust in each other (1 Samuel 18:4). When necessary they defended each other (1 Samuel 19:4ff) and they were loyal (1 Samuel 20:1-42). That is the kind of love Peter is teaching we should show towards all our fellow believers in Christ.

*'Be compassionate'* or *'be tender hearted'* v 8 - the word means to have a sense of bearing and forbearing (see Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13). There should be no harshness or unkind or sarcastic thoughts towards each

other. We are to be like our heavenly Father who pities his children (see Psalm 103:13).

*'And humble'* v 8 – each believer is to esteem other brothers and sisters in Christ better and more worthy than themselves (see Philippians 2:3). We are to be meek or in subjection to one another, following the pattern of Christ (see Matthew 11:29; 1 Peter 2:21-24). Remember the Lord Jesus suffered all for his brethren and considered them his friends (compare John 15:15 with Proverbs 18:24).

## **2) The consequence will be blessing. 1 Peter 3:9**

Peter begins with a very practical command, *"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing because to this you were called..."* We see something of Peter's pastoral heart displaying itself again here. He knew that sometimes believers can treat other believers in a despicable manner. Their words and actions can be hurtful and damaging and malicious. This should never be the case between believers, nor should it be our response to unbelievers. Peter highlights the time when we are in the greatest danger of not responding correctly, namely, when evil has been done to us or when we are insulted by others. The natural heart of man immediately wants to retaliate. Peter says this should never characterise the follower of Christ. We find this sad attitude all around the world, but Christian believers need to remember we belong to another world. We are citizens of heaven, (see Philippians 3:20) therefore our behaviour should be different from the sinful way men and women in our world behave towards each

other. We must be honest at this point and say that what Peter is asking from us is very, very hard. There is in all of us our old sinful nature and it wants to control us. We must resist all such temptations, and the way to do this is by humble yet fervent prayer to the Lord for his grace to respond to hostility shown towards us in a godly way.

The glorious result is “...so that you may inherit a blessing.”

This whole passage is so similar to Psalm 133 where the Lord commands a blessing on brothers who dwell together in unity. 1 Peter 3:9 and Psalm 133 are a commentary on each other as follows:

Psalm 133 - Unity is good and pleasant v1

1 Peter 3 - Who would dare deny that this attitude and pattern of meekness is other than good and pleasant?

Psalm 133 - It is acceptable to God like the ointment Aaron was anointed with v 2

1 Peter 3 - Since Christ was always acceptable to His Father then those who act like Christ must likewise be acceptable to him.

Psalm 133 - It is refreshing to heaven and earth v 3

1 Peter 3 - In a world of sin and contention it is refreshing to find a peaceful and harmonious situation

Psalm 133 - There the Lord commanded the blessing v3

1 Peter 3 - The blessing is inherited – that is it comes as a direct consequence upon a certain action – It is something to which, in a limited sense, we have an entitlement – It is

commanded by God to those who have the right relationship with each other as Christians.

Psalm 133 - The blessing is life for evermore v 3

1 Peter 3 - The blessing is the satisfaction of those who love life.

### **3) A reinforcement brought from the Old Testament. 1 Peter 3:10-12**

Peter now draws on Psalm 34:12-16 to support his arguments. The conditions of blessing are listed in 1 Peter 3:10-11:

- Refraining from evil and deceitful words.
- Being perfectly honest and straightforward with each other.
- Hating evil and doing good.
- Seeking peace and pursuing it.

These all fit in with what Peter has been saying about the relationship between believers and declares the consequence 1 Peter 3:12, “*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*”

God will bless such:

- He will watch over them, preserving their life.
- He will listen to their prayers (compare also v 7), being attentive to their every cry and need.
- He will be against their enemies and all who do evil.

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## **Chapter 4 - Suffering (part 1) 3:13-17**

### **Introduction.**

Little could have been more relevant to these scattered Christians than the theme of suffering which Peter deals with in the remainder of chapter 3 and into chapter 4. We have already seen that his whole letter is taken up with encouraging his readers to persevere in the face of opposition and persecution. Part of that persecution involved severe physical pain and suffering on account of their faith. Peter therefore encouraged them in the face of that. At this point in his letter he has moved from mental and spiritual pressure to deal with the physical. To begin with Peter explains the Christian's attitude towards suffering (3v13-17) and then brings the example of Christ to support and encourage them (3v18-22).

Peter begins by asking a rhetorical question in 3:13, *"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good."* On the merely human level, normally people do not harm those who are eager to do good. The normal reaction is to be very grateful to such a person.

[If we look at that question from a spiritual perspective, ultimately no one can harm us eternally. You will remember that men thought they had destroyed Christ but God raised him from the dead (3:18; 21ff). We can say, therefore, no suffering, pain or distress can ultimately destroy us or separate us from our Saviour (see Romans 8:34ff; Isaiah 43:2).]

Having presented us with the normal reaction to those who do good, Peter is also a realist. He knows that in spite of that general rule, there are those who will still oppose

Christian believers when they seek to do good. Indeed, such opposition can explode into physical violence and brutality against the Lord's people. So the reality of suffering is great, and Peter wants us to approach such violence in the right way. How can Christians face it and live through it?

Peter encourages us by dealing with a number of factors:

**1) The fear of suffering. 1 Peter 3:14**

*"But even if you should suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.'"*

Suffering for the Christian is nothing to be afraid of, even though naturally we all shrink back from the thought of it and we know it is very unpleasant. Peter is not attempting to diminish the seriousness of suffering at all. He is quoting from Isaiah 8:12 and is teaching us not to be afraid of the things the enemies of the Lord fear, but rather we are to fear God. Remember our Lord's own words in Matthew 10:28, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell."* Suffering for Christ may destroy our bodies but cannot touch our soul. We should fear God rather than man, and fear God's wrath rather than man's hatred, and fear the suffering of hell rather than the temporary suffering we may be called to endure in this life.

Our Saviour told us to expect opposition John 16:33, *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* Also, Peter no doubt had in his mind Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which he actually heard. In Matthew 5:10-13 Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of things 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.”*

This raises an important question. How is suffering a blessing? To use Peter’s words in v 14 it is *“...when you suffer for what is right.”* That is for righteousness’ and Christ’s sake. That is on account of our love for the Lord Jesus and devotion to him, his Word and his ways. Whatever the outward pain and distress there is peace within because we do not have a tortured conscience before God (see 3:16).

Peter, along with John, was himself an example of this when he had been arrested and warned with threats not to speak any more about the Lord Jesus Christ. We read his response in Acts 4:19-20, *“...Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.’”* Peter did not allow

the fear of man to hinder his service for the Lord. We must also add that suffering in the end can only make us more like our dear Saviour and if we are killed by our persecutors it will mean we will immediately be with the Lord.

One of the ways we can encourage ourselves in the face of such hostility is to remember the promises of the Lord. For example, in Isaiah 43:2-3 God declares,

*“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour...”*

For further encouragement consider how Paul puts it in Romans 8:18, *“I consider our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

## **2) The preparation for suffering. 1 Peter 3:15**

Peter writes,

*“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”*

There is a worldwide organisation for young people called the Scouts. Their motto is “Be Prepared”. Peter is teaching each believer not to be so foolish as to be unprepared for suffering for Christ. Again a question is raised. How do we prepare for suffering? Peter gives us a number of things to do even before suffering affects us.

First, we are to set Christ apart as our Lord in our hearts, or to sanctify the Lord in our hearts. In other words, make sure our relationship with God is right and keep it right. Have God as the focus of our thinking and life. Have Christ and the Word of God lodged in our hearts at all times so that he governs our lives. Be God centred rather than self, man or time centred.

Second, be ready to give an answer - a defence - for the hope that we have. Have it settled in your own heart as to why you are ready to face suffering. We have the hope of heaven, the hope of glory, the hope of being with Christ and being made like him, and this will go on forever. Know that you are suffering because you are a Christian. This was Paul’s testimony in 2 Timothy 1:11-12 and 4:6.

The Lord will give the words to speak to our tormentors (Mark 13:11) but we need to be sure whose we are and whom we serve. This is why in his second letter Peter writes in 2 Peter 2:10-11 *“Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will*

*receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

### **3) The shame attached to suffering. 1 Peter 3:16**

*“Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”*

None of us likes to be exposed in a shameful manner and yet this is what we must expect as part of suffering for Christ’s sake. Mockery, verbal abuse, physical violence, arrest, imprisonment and torture bring with them shame in various ways. No one wants to be thought of as wicked and guilty. You will recall that Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves from God because they were ashamed. How then can we face the shame associated with persecution?

To begin with Peter urges us to have a clear conscience. Be right with God. Remember our sin is forgiven and we have been justified or pronounced not guilty by God. This being the case we have no need to feel any sense of shame before him when men wrongfully accuse us. This is what matters more than anything else. Men may accuse as much as they like but they do not matter. God is on our side therefore we will not fear what man can do unto us (Psalm 118:6). We must ensure we have unblemished or “good behaviour”. This is how we are to stand before men. If our lives are godly and upright we will have nothing to be ashamed of when we suffer for Christ’s sake. When this is

true of us their accusations are groundless and this will result in them being ashamed of their malicious accusations which are all false. Even if they do not feel such shame in this life, they certainly will on the day of judgement.

#### 4) God's will in suffering. 1 Peter 3:17

*"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."*

Peter is dealing with some very searching matters in this verse. He is telling us we should not bring suffering upon ourselves because we have behaved in a sinful way. If we do wrong or do evil and we suffer then we are only getting what we deserve. He is reinforcing what he taught in the previous verse.

He then turns to one of the great mysteries of life and the providences of God. There are times when it is God's will that we suffer for doing good. When we face this, our faithful testimony will bring much honour to God. But this inevitably raises the question of why we have to suffer for doing good. Why does God in his sovereignty allow this to happen to his dear children? This is a question that has exercised the hearts and minds of the Lord's people down the centuries, and we must be honest and say that we do not always know why God's children sometimes have to endure such hardship. You will recall that Job suffered greatly but he was never told why he suffered. We simply must trust God with all our hearts at such times. That said, there are some things we can say in answer to this

searching question and these are in the Bible itself which is the revealed will of God.

First, the Bible teaches us that often God is sanctifying us through our sufferings. He uses suffering and trial to make us more holy and more like Jesus. We read in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality..."* We can link this with Hebrews 12 and the teaching on the Lord's discipline of us, where we are told in verse 10, *"...God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."* The question to ask in suffering is not *"WHY* is God allowing this suffering?" but *"WHAT* is God dealing with in my life in this suffering? What is he sanctifying in me? How is God setting me even further apart for him in this?" Basically God is developing and maturing us by means of suffering. He is making us more like the Saviour and weaning us away from this world and all its trifles.

Second, we can add that God's will in suffering is to stir us up to thanksgiving and worship. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 we read, *"...give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* Note Paul does not say that all circumstances are happy or joyful or always good. But it is still God's will that even in such times of hardship we should not lose sight of who he is and what he has done for us in Christ, and therefore are to praise him. We can add that when we realize that suffering is ultimately for our lasting profit and good thankfulness

should be stirred up within us. We have the examples of Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16) singing praises to God from their prison cell at midnight. (See also Paul 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Romans 8:18.) As we said earlier, when we realize that we are becoming more like Christ we should find our hearts rejoicing (see also 1 Peter 4:13).

### **Conclusion**

What we are discovering is that the way for the Christian to face suffering is to face it in faith as defined by Hebrews 11:1. That chapter is full of examples of testings through sufferings of the Old Testament believers. We cannot always see but we can always believe that there is blessing in our sufferings for the sake of Christ and his gospel. There is no shame for the Christian in suffering when God's plan for us in suffering is perfect and for his glory. We take God at his word in Romans 8:28, not lightheartedly but sincerely, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

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### **Chapter 5 Suffering (part 2). 3:18-22**

#### **Introduction.**

The Saviour's suffering on the cross is the supreme example of suffering for doing good (v 17), and it brought immense blessing to others who would otherwise have perished eternally. Peter will expand on this in verses 18 to 22. Before coming to deal with those verses in detail, in this chapter we are going to digress a little as an introduction to them. We will consider how each of the

four points we considered in our previous chapter applied to the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter has encouraged his readers by dealing with the fear of suffering, the necessity of preparation for suffering, the shame attached to suffering, and God's will and suffering. Our ultimate example when it comes to suffering is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and so to understand this we turn to the closing scenes of our Lord's life and ministry.

#### **1) Christ and the fear of suffering.**

In Gethsemane our Lord was confronted with the cup of suffering he was about to endure and was almost overwhelmed with the prospect. As we consider him in the garden there is an atmosphere of fear and unspeakable dread. In Mark 14:33 we read that Jesus *"...began to be deeply distressed and troubled."* As he anticipated the suffering that lay in front of him; as he considered that he who knew no sin would be made sin for us (something his sinlessness would recoil from but which he could not avoid) and as he knew he had to suffer sin's penalty for us, he was thrown into a state of holy terror or fear, alarm and dread. He experienced anguish and depression *"...deeply..."*

Luke the doctor tells us that Jesus was in agony. Luke 22:44 *"And being in anguish, he prayed the more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."* For him this was not a light hearted or flippant view of suffering as if it could be easily dismissed. No, there was spiritual, mental and emotional pressure such

as no other human being has ever known either before or since. There was for him that state of holy fear and dread.

How did Jesus handle this? How did he cope and manage to go through with it all? He prayed earnestly and submitted completely to his Father's will (see Mark 14:35-39; Luke 23:42). He acted so that Peter would later write 1 Peter 5:6-7,

*“All of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.”* We must do the same.

## **2) Christ and preparation for suffering.**

Jesus was prepared for his sufferings because he was right with his Father. He had glorified his Father throughout all of his life, and could pray in John 17:4, *“I have brought glory to you on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”* His Father's glory was uppermost in his mind. ‘Your will be done’ was his theme throughout his life, as it was at the end in the garden of Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:39).

He was also ready to answer for his hope. He knew and could give account as to why he was about to suffer. He was going to prepare glory for his people (John 14:3). He was obeying his Father's commandment (John 14:31). He

was fulfilling Scripture (John 15:25). He was reconciling his people to God (John n 16:21ff; 1 Peter 3:18). He declared all this boldly before the high priest (John 18:19-24) and before Pilate (John 18:28-37; 19:8-12).

## **3) Christ and the shame of suffering.**

Think of the shame that attached to betrayal, false accusation, nakedness, mockery, scourging and crucifixion itself. He suffered for sins, the just for the unjust. He was put to death in a cruel manner (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus could bear this because he had the answer of a good conscience before both God and man and because he was prepared for it.

## **4) Christ and God's will in suffering.**

God's will for our Lord was basically the same as it is for us. By that we mean he suffered to accomplish our sanctification (not his as he was already and eternally holy). Our salvation which Jesus accomplished is described as bringing us to God (1 Peter 3:18). He accomplished our deliverance from destruction like those in the ark with Noah (1 Peter 3:20). And it was all to the end that God should be glorified. Indeed, the purpose of the resurrection was the glorification of Christ (1 Peter 3:22). Through him we in turn shall know resurrection and glorification.

With this background we turn next to 1 Peter 3:18-22.

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## **Chapter 6 Suffering (part 3) 3:18-22**

## Introduction.

The passage before us contains some of the most difficult verses in the Bible to understand. Some of the verses have been the subject of a great deal of debate and have been understood in over one hundred different ways! That fact alone should make us humble and cautious so that we are not too dogmatic about the way we interpret them.

Having said that we will endeavour to come to a measure of understanding of what this part of the Word of God is teaching us. As always, we must examine the context very carefully and thus our study will be thorough in this area.

### 1) The Context.

Peter is writing to believers who were suffering for Christ and the Gospel's sake. In verses 14 to 17 he has shown that: -

- i. Christians need not be *afraid* to suffer (v 14).
- ii. Christians should be *prepared* to suffer (v 15).
- iii. suffering for Christ is *nothing to be ashamed of* (v 16).
- iv. that God has *a purpose in suffering* (v 17).

Peter now encourages his fellow disciples by showing them how Christ suffered for them on the cross (v 18) before rising again and ascending into heaven (v 21-22). It is in this context that Peter brings in the difficult verses 19 and 20. We need to note also the reference to the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (v 18-19).

## 2) The Death of Christ.

In the first part of v 18 Peter explains three facts about the death of the Lord Jesus:

- The reason for Christ's death. "*...Christ died for sins once for all...*"  
God's 'Anointed One' took our place on the cross. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered for our sins. He was physically and cruelly put to death. Wonderfully his sacrifice was completely sufficient to deal with sin, which is why Peter tells us it was "*...once for all...*" This is good news. Nothing more needs to be added to what Jesus has done to make sinners right with God. He has secured salvation for all who will simply trust him to forgive them.
- The nature of Christ's death "*...the righteous for the unrighteous...*"  
Jesus did not suffer for sins which were his own as he had none, he was righteous. Instead, he suffered for those who were wretched, filthy and vile in the sight of God. He suffered for the sinful, the unworthy, the lost. He suffered for the unrighteous. As the hymn writer Philip Bliss has put it:  
*"Bearing shame and scoffing rude  
In my place condemned he stood;  
Sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour."*
- The purpose of Christ's death "*...to bring you to God.*"  
This was a term used of one who gained an audience at the royal court for another and then went and brought them to the king. Jesus made peace with the

Father for us. The result of this was that we are given access to God in all his glory and perfection. We need no other person to mediate on our behalf; we can come to God directly through Jesus Christ. (See also 1 Timothy 2:5.) The Christian believer now has full, free, permanent access to God in prayer because of the Saviour.

## 2) The resurrection of Christ.

In the rest of v 18 Peter tells us about the resurrection of Christ, that he “...*was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit...*” Jesus’ death was a real death, a violent execution, a physical death. But that was not the end of him because he was raised by the Spirit. This eighteenth verse speaks of Christ’s great victory for his people.

It is now that we come to the difficult verses which as we have already mentioned can be understood in so many different ways.

*“...He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved...”*

We have already warned against the danger of being too dogmatic about these verses, but would suggest the

following two possibilities as worth our consideration. First, that the Lord Jesus, prior to his resurrection, went to the disobedient of Noah’s day who are imprisoned and awaiting the final judgement or to fallen angels, and that he went to them to declare his triumph and make them aware of their final judgement. The second suggestion is that by his divine nature by which he was raised, Christ had previously been at work in the days of Noah working through the preaching of Noah. Those who refused to listen then are in prison now awaiting final judgement. Again we must stress that all the possible ways of understanding this passage have difficulties so we must act with humility and grace when we hear other genuine believers in the Lord differing slightly over these verses.

In v 20 Peter reminds us of the great patience of God during the days of Noah. It probably took Noah 120 years to build the ark (Genesis 6:3). It was after all a huge vessel. During this time we know that Noah preached (see 2 Peter 2:5). His message was one of righteousness exposing the sin of the people. God patiently gave them plenty of opportunity to repent, but tragically they refused to do so and they perished, but gloriously eight did believe God and were saved when the flood came. (See also God’s patience in 2 Peter 3:9.) Peter tells us that the water of the flood is a symbol of baptism, and that baptism is a symbol of salvation. Note Peter’s words carefully v 21, “...*this water symbolises baptism that now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection*

*of Jesus Christ...*” Peter is careful to show that it is Christ who is the Saviour and that baptism is a “...pledge...” that the conscience is cleansed. It is like a corresponding stamp or accreditation that the baptised person is already enjoying salvation in Christ. This salvation is enjoyed because Jesus has been raised. His resurrection is the evidence that he has fully satisfied his heavenly Father who is the Judge of all the earth. Sin has been atoned for, Hallelujah!

### 3) The ascension of Christ.

After the resurrection came the ascension of Jesus, or as Peter puts it in v 22, “*who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*” Christ’s victory is over sin, Satan, death and hell. Now he is exalted to glory. He has gone into heaven in his resurrection body. That body so cruelly marred by crucifixion has now been glorified. And his glorification is the assurance that the believer will also be glorified (see 1 Corinthians 15:20). The Lord’s ascension also commenced his intercessory ministry as he prays for us constantly at God’s right hand (see Romans 8:30, Hebrews 9:12). There in heaven he is enthroned at God’s right hand in the place of supreme honour and privilege and sovereignty. All heavenly beings and spiritual powers are subject to him and under his control. This is the sure reason for the Christian believer’s hope, (see also Romans 10:9-10, Ephesians 1:19-22).

### 4) Application.

Knowing the blessedness which is now the Lord’s as a direct consequence of his suffering for doing good, Peter uses this to encourage us when in a similar situation of suffering as his first readers. Our future glory with Christ surely stimulates us to be more and more holy which encourages us to persevere in following the Lord when all seems against us and stimulates us to respond as he did to his persecutors. A day is coming when we shall be rewarded for our faithfulness to Christ for we shall be with him forever. Peter, like Paul, is teaching us that nothing we may suffer whilst here on earth can be likened to the blessings God has in store for us (see Romans 8:18 and v 28-39). Just as Christ had the victory so will we. In him we have the victory over the world around us, the flesh within us and the devil who opposes us. Thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:57).

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