

SUFFERING AS CHRISTIANS

BY B. G. ECHOLS

In 1 Peter 4:12-19, the apostle returns to a theme he has often touched in this epistle, the conduct of Christians in persecution. Persecution seems far away from us, but it may not always be so. For a long time the world had tolerated Christians because the worldly people were indifferent. Now that is changing. The world is getting more antagonistic toward God's way. Thus persecution may well return.

Regardless of how severe our trials, God expects certain things of us. Peter presents five arguments to faithfulness. 1) Persecution is not a strange or unusual thing. Knowing what to expect is always helpful in being prepared. 2) To suffer as Christ did is to share in His glory. 3) Besides future glory, God is with us now. 4) It is an honor to suffer as a Christian. 5) While such is a test or judgment to us, what greater woe will befall those who do not obey the gospel.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you. "Beloved" is a term of endearment which shows the sympathy Peter feels for these embattled saints (2:1). In their distress he did not turn away from them. While some may have been literally tried by fire, the term is figurative to indicate the severity of what is coming upon them. The persecution was already beginning. It would be like a fiery furnace. Soon the shout of "to the lions" will be heard as the great power of Rome attempts to blot out the very name of Christians. The malice of Satan was stirred to the utmost and he would make a mighty effort to crush the church. Peter does not attempt to lessen the severity of their trials. Rather than pray for escape should we not pray for strength to endure to His glory and in anticipation of glory?

Which cometh upon you to prove you. God's purpose in allowing persecution is to prove us, not destroy us (2 Thess. 1:4, 5). One of the Old Testament verses Peter may have had in mind is Proverbs 27:21. From God's point of view, the permitted suffering is never without a point or value. The church is tested, judged, and proved by suffering. Are we being deprived by a lack of trial? Suffering

itself cleanses no heart and rectifies no wrong. But it can be a means of humbling us to self-examination as members of His body, and cause us to seek His grace which alone can cleanse us from sin.

Considering then and now we are made to remember how little it sometimes takes to upset us. We despair and are prepared to curse God over calamities that strike us as worldlings. What if we were smitten with persecution for no other reason than the fact that we believe in Jesus Christ? Would we act *as though a strange thing happened*? The idea is of something that is foreign or alien. While our conduct is strange to them, theirs is not to be strange to us for God has foretold it. Christ has foretold such (Mt. 24:9, 21, 22). So did the apostles (Acts 14:22). Disciples are not to think that trials are foreign to following God. Instead, they should understand them to be characteristic of such (2 Tim. 3:12).

There is a popular, but false, theology of "health and wealth" which maintains that the sun always shines on Christians, that the grass is always green, and that the spiritual temperature around us is always ideal. Those who believe such need a dose of 1 Peter. People with such a completely unbiblical notion and narrow concept of God tend to blame God anytime something goes wrong. It is as if He had let them down or failed in His promises. Not so! The Jewish converts to Christ may have better understood persecution for religious reasons, but for Gentile converts, this was new. Their old pagan religious beliefs had brought no opposition. To them it was strange to suffer for faith. It must not be to us.

Our attitude in persecution is to be one of rejoicing. *Insomuch as ye are partakers of Christ's suffering, rejoice.* Peter must remember the words of Jesus (Mt. 5:11, 12). Obedience to this command cannot be carried out until we develop the proper attitude. A mind other than Christ's mind is unfit to bear trials. Why did Christ suffer? If our sufferings are the same as Christ's, originate in the same causes, and prompted by the same motives, then

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CAN WE SEE THE BIBLE ALIKE?

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Faith and opinion do not come the same way. Opinion may come from various sources, but "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). We must "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Otherwise, we have no promise of eternal salvation. Let us examine a prevalent "view" which many people espouse and see, in the light of God's word, whether it is by FAITH or OPINION.

There are many people who think that "we cannot see the Bible alike." Is this idea so? Is it BY FAITH or OPINION? If it is BY FAITH, please tell us where the Word of God teaches it. Many times this statement is made in an effort to "justify" religious sects and religious error. Let us now consider the question: CAN WE SEE THE BIBLE ALIKE?

If we can understand the Bible at all, then we can understand it alike. We either understand it (alike) or we misunderstood it.

If Not, Why Not?

If we cannot understand the Bible, WHY did the Psalmist say: "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple" (Psalms 119:130). Also see Psalms 119:105.

If we cannot understand the Bible, WHY did Isaiah say: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isaiah 40:5).

If we cannot understand the Bible, WHY did Paul say:

1. "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth?" (2 Timothy 2:15)

2. "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery: (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ?)" (Eph. 3:3-4)

3. "Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is?" (Eph. 5:17)
Also see 1 Cor. 1:10.

Yes, We Can!

Yes, we can see the Bible alike:

1. If we are not blinded by error of Satan. (See 2 Cor. 4:3.)
2. If we are not blinded by prejudice. (See James 1:21.)
3. If we do not close our eyes, stop our ears and harden our hearts. (See Matthew 13:15.)
4. If we approach a study of it *humbly*, with a sincere desire to learn the truth as revealed therein and to obey it from the heart. (See Matthew 5:6; John 17:7 & 2 Thess. 2:10-12.)

NO, the idea that "we cannot see the Bible alike" IS NOT BY FAITH AND CANNOT BE ADVOCATED BY FAITH! *It is mere opinion. Yes, it is possible for us to understand God's Word!*

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we can rejoice because we shall share in His glory (Jn. 15:20).

The early Christians looked upon their suffering for Christ as a fellowship with Him (Phil. 3:10; Rom. 8:17). This is an action of faith. This result of suffering is one reason to rejoice *that at the revelation of his glory also ye may rejoice with exceeding joy.*

This refers to His return to judge the world. The joy we have in suffering is only the down payment of the joy we shall have when He returns. No one will welcome the return of the Lord more than those who suffer for Him (2 Pet. 3:12). Suffering now is preparation for heaven. There is an unspeakable future glory. We should rejoice in persecution as it helps us prepare for heaven. It weans us from earthly enjoyments, and helps lift our eyes from earth to see by faith the glory which is to be revealed.