

# Wholesome Thoughts in the Face of Persecution

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Date: 01 March 2020

Preacher: Peter Dickson

[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you again for the invitation to be with you, and as I have done before, thank you for your prayers and support of the outreach and witness of Christian students through the Christian unions throughout Scotland.

We're very grateful to you for praying for that evangelistic effort. The door of opportunity for the gospel on the university campus is still pretty much wide open.

Some pushback, and we're coming to look at that in 1 Peter. But we're just off the back of five mission weeks run by the CEUs throughout Scotland, and we have seen a small number of people profess faith and many more elsewhere in the UK, and others now reading Mark's gospel, which we have specifically produced in a version for students with their Bible studies at the back of it, and then others still engaged with their questions and struggles and issues as they pursue truth and meaning.

So thank you for your prayers, and do pray for the Christians at university as they gather around the gospel and seek to make it known to their campuses.

Well, we had our Bible reading here in 1 Peter 4, verses 12 to 19, and in one sense, this is one of these Bible passages where there is not much about the passage that is difficult to understand.

[ 1 : 46 ] As the Apostle writes, and I guess you've been looking through 1 Peter, is that right? As the Apostle writes this letter, and indeed as he writes the next letter, which is known to us as 2 Peter, he is writing, and he says this explicitly about both letters, in 2 Peter 3, verse 1, he is writing to stimulate the believers to wholesome thinking.

And he goes on in verse 2 of that chapter to say, I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

Wholesome thinking for us Christian believers is recalling what the Scriptures say, the prophets and the apostles. And the message of the prophets was so often, wasn't it?

A day is coming. Judgment is coming. And the message of the apostles, Christ will return again. Look to the future. A day is coming.

And you can live now in the light of what you know is ahead. And what Peter is saying throughout both of these letters is live today, live this week, live now, not just focusing on the here and now and being all consumed by what you can see and experience, but live today with biblical perspective in your mind.

[ 3 : 30 ] Wholesome thinking, remembering that what we do today for the Lord Jesus is lived out with the day that is still to come very much in mind.

Now, part of that living today for tomorrow, for the last day, is how do we cope when people are suffering for following the Lord Jesus Christ?

How do we cope specifically when there is direct and overt persecution or action against Christian people simply because they are Christians?

That's what Peter is speaking about. And as we look at the passage, very simple in one sense in terms of what we are being taught, but very profound in terms of how we understand such things and respond to them throughout the world or in our own lives.

What is wholesome thinking? That's what Peter wants us to have. What is wholesome thinking with regards to overt persecution of Christian believers?

[ 4 : 44 ] I have seven things that I want to just briefly run through that might constitute something of wholesome thinking as we find it in this passage. And first of all, this combining of suffering and glory, that's a theme in 1 Peter.

Suffering and glory are absolutely held together in the teaching of the apostles. Not just Peter, of course, but John and Paul and the other New Testament writers as well.

it has been this way since the beginning of the church. As one early church writer put it, and you'll have heard this phrase I suspect, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And so, over the history of the Christian church, as predicted and taught in the scriptures, when Christians are most severely persecuted for following the Lord Jesus, far from extinguishing the Christian gospel from society or from a nation, what the persecutors inadvertently do is spread the Christian gospel.

Something happens when Christians act as Peter asks them to act here. And what happens is that their suffering becomes a sermon to all who look on.

[ 6 : 13 ] I want you just to turn to the letter of the Philippians, if you can, in your Bible or on your phone or press the buttons backwards and get to Philippians chapter 1.

Just look at the last section of Philippians chapter 1 with me for a moment just so that we can see a very clear example of what Paul is speaking about here.

Philippians chapter 1 verse 27. Whatever happens and Philippians was written just at the time that Nero was beginning to come to power and the Christians were beginning to be persecuted.

Whatever happens and he means by that whether I live or die conduct yourselves in other words current behavior in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence I will know that you stand firm united in one spirit contending as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you this in other words this united standing firm in the gospel this is a sign to them that them being the opponents this is a sign to them that they will be destroyed but that you will be saved and that by God.

Isn't that a remarkable thing? As persecution comes to Christian believers and those who are viciously opposed to the gospel put Christians through one kind of suffering another the Christian response to that suffering becomes a sermon to them in which they are told what they increasingly know to be true that they are on the road to destruction they see the response of a Christian believer with the help of the Holy Spirit in their lives and they know that these people have something before almighty God that they do not have a remarkable thing and that is just woven into the pattern of the New Testament and into the pattern of 1 Peter so that's the first thing suffering and glory belong together and that is not unique to this particular passage secondly there is something about being persecuted for following

[ 9 : 12 ] Jesus that is in keeping with our other relationships in the church in the family and in society as Christian people we are constantly conscious of the fact that just as Jesus submitted to the costly will of his father for him so we reflecting our union with Jesus are involved in all sorts of relationships where we willingly submit to one another it's the turning upside down of the human sinful ego when the spirit comes and we're given new life in Christ we become those who are more and more inclined to think in a Christ-like way about kneeling and serving or submitting to a God-given authority rather than exerting ourselves over and above others that is part of our

Christian demeanor and it is that part of our demeanor that we are still portraying if Christians are persecuted we become like the Lord Jesus we are willing to be subject to one another Romans talks about it being subject to those whom God has given us in society to rule over us that is good for society Paul teaches in our church family we are subject to our leaders because God has given them to us to care for us and protect us in the family of the gospel and so on and so on now that kind of language is an abomination to the sinful unbroken human heart but to Christian people that is just a reflection of how the Lord Jesus submits to the will of his father for us it is the norm it is not lacking in dignity but it is hard and painful in a fallen world so it is very often right and possible for us to submit to one another in church in family in society and even in persecution for the sake of Christ and being subject is not the same as being silent ever being silent may mean in this case where we are being persecuted that we are no longer willing to profess the Lord Jesus Christ Peter doesn't call us to be silent but he calls Christians to be subject to something that's the second thing here's the third and now more into the text itself for three through seven suffering like this persecution for following Jesus is normal Christian experience if you take the global church and if you take the span of the history of the church suffering for following

Jesus is entirely normal and that's what Peter says isn't it in verse 12 we should not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering we should actually expect it we should be prepared for this to happen and indeed experience teaches us because we have 2000 years of history since Peter wrote this letter experience teaches us that what Peter wrote is indeed the case it just is not

surprising don't think that something strange is happening to you he says get used to the fact that this is normal Christian experience and you folks like many of us in our evangelical churches will pray for and follow the instances of Christians who are overtly persecuted for their faith in Christ you will probably read the magazines and the prayer leaflets of the likes of the Barnabas

Trust to name but one organization that is there to encourage awareness and promote support for those who are suffering for following Christ and the range of ministries and churches that exist who pray for persecuted believers should simply teach us that this is what happens when the gospel takes root in a culture and in a nation and is proclaimed to those who don't know the Lord Jesus persecution is what happens it's normal and we know that but still in some way when we read a passage like this we feel slightly distant from it and were the day to come when you were persecuted in some way for following Christ then Peter says just have this in your foundational thinking don't be surprised it's not something strange that's happening now I would say that we're all well aware that the days of any notion of Christian privilege in our society and culture are well passed and indeed we're probably increasingly living in the context of low grade

[15:04] Christian persecution by some that I don't think would come as a great shock to us we see the battles that go around particularly in the university world around the issues of free speech and who is allowed to say what and who is allowed to say things that might upset someone else and the responses to that one of our small Christian union groups here's just one example put on or wanted to put on a lunchtime discussion around the theme where was God when the terrorist bomb went off and the university said no somebody could be offended by that discussion and it was shut down now the the kind of notion that some others might be really helped to come and talk about that doesn't count for anything the notion that we live in a society where nobody has to come into that discussion they're just invited to if they want that doesn't count for anything no that's not happening interesting and yet in other universities some of our

Christian unions are being given awards by the students union body for being a really welcoming and open and genuine and upfront and transparent organization and part of me thinks could the people in this students union not speak to the people over here but there is the beginnings in the university world of this kind of persecution this kind of closing you down action there will be many cases and here you can follow the news produced by CAIR or the Christian Institute and others of people being passed over for promotion because they're a Christian or people indeed being put out of work because of Christian beliefs so there are lots of examples there and my guess is that as we see society being increasingly cowed and swayed into only being able to say and articulate and think what is the approved social norm of the day only if you fit in with the cultural beliefs of the day with the up-to-date doctrine of our culture will you be accepted that I think is gaining ground where will it end who in the world knows the

Lord knows so it is normal Christianity but look on beyond verse 12 and here fourthly suffering like this for following the Lord Jesus is actually part and parcel and here is something even more profound of our core identity in Christ look at verses 13 and 14 so don't be surprised but instead rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed if you are insulted because of the name of Christ you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you that is a remarkable sentence isn't it something profound is happening when you are targeted or singled out for following the Lord

Jesus at that moment you are participating in you are united to the Lord Jesus and his sufferings and the spirit of God Peter says rests on you at that moment now that is very spiritual and very profound but I think we could do a very very good job by equipping our children and young people to understand that when they're at school I think we forget unless we are parents of young children we forget just how cruel the playground or the classroom can be by way of an environment that is very quick to slap someone down who sticks out for whatever reason and we forget because it's unpleasant and it's hard and we move on in life but probably for most of us if we paused and took time to remember the most difficult things if you were following

Christ as a school people the most difficult things that occurred because of that no wonder we forget but for all of us who have kids at school today the atmosphere is no different in fact it's probably harder how do you equip a six year old a ten year old a thirteen year old to be willing to say yeah I follow Christ I believe what the Bible teaches I have a church family that I belong to on Sundays to say any of those things even something as low grade as I'm going to the scripture union group do you want to come with me those things are really tough and persecution in that context

can be fairly undetected below the radar parents and teachers may or may not know about it but to train and encourage our children that if just because they believe in Jesus people are going to say cutting damning offensive critical things to them then

[ 21 : 28 ] God himself their heavenly father says when that happens we are very close to Jesus in his sufferings and his spirit is with us what a wonderful thing to be taught by the scriptures and how much more profound is that than just reckoning it to be normal it is part of our core identity in the Lord Jesus we follow someone and belong to someone who did not stand on his rights to be treated in the way that we would expect him to be treated remember his trial remember his responses yes it is as you say I am the Christ simple straightforward uncomplicated responses in the face of those who eventually put him to death and the Lord Jesus our risen king knows and is with us by his spirit every time something like this happens that's very wonderful I think number five suffering for

Christ is not to be confused and here Peter is very wise and shrewd in his teaching is not to be confused with suffering because we've been sinful or stupid look at verse 15 and 16 if you suffer it should not be as a murderer or thief or meddler however if you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed but praise God that you bear that name I wonder how many of us can relate to this and think of situations where the other Christian in our workplace or the other Christian in a context is actually behaving badly in a way that makes our toes curl up in our shoes and we think for whatever reason that Christian is giving out all the wrong signals about following

Jesus we get angry we lose our temper we have a reputation of being the person who is short with others or who is overbearing with people we line manage who is constantly ducking out of work that others have to pick up and so on and so on and so on well then that Christian will suffer because naturally people will turn on them won't they either subtly or overtly but they're not suffering for following Jesus in that case they're suffering because they're being sinful and unwise and Peter says don't be confused between these two things or similarly you may have known people who have suffered terribly in their lives and faced ferocious persecution and as far as they know before the Lord they've done nothing wrong but they're consumed with the question what have I done wrong Lord to have brought this upon me and Peter says no no don't be confused about these things don't get sinfulness and suffering muddled up all the time some suffering is because we are sinful some persecution is just because you are

Christian and if it's just because you are Christian the chances may well be that you've done absolutely nothing wrong it's just normal Christian experience do you see what he's saying there how wise of him to put in that caveat don't you descend to the behaviour of everybody else around you if you suffer for goodness sake don't let it be because you've been wicked in some way or another no if you suffer as a Christian hold your head up high do not be ashamed and praise God that you're worthy of owning the name of the Lord Jesus that's a very challenging thing isn't it because the pressure is to just creep back put your head down beneath the parapet step back from proximity to Jesus and then the suffering will go away that's how it was with

Peter who wrote this letter right at the very point when the Lord Jesus was being crucified you were with him weren't you from Galilee no no no no I don't know him at all see lessen the association and we can soon stop the suffering why there are many many of our brothers and sisters in glory now aren't there because they were told either renounce your faith in the Lord Jesus or lose your life and at that in those extreme situations believers are given extraordinary ability by God himself to have that perspective which sees glory and honors the king and knows that death if it comes will simply be the gateway to eternal life in his presence but 2nd

[ 27 : 13 ] Peter again if you turn over the page to chapter 1 of 2nd Peter Peter himself is very conscious of this chapter 1 verse 13 I think it's right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body because I know that I will soon put it aside as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me he knows the end is coming well Jesus told him that didn't he when he reinstated him he told Peter how he would die he knows the end is coming he's writing these letters to help others be strong in their faith even to the point of death and he knows that that road is the one he's on himself and he was as legend has it crucified upside down in the city of Rome and put to death as one of the first Christian martyrs so Peter is not writing this first letter with some kind of blissful distance between himself and the theory he is writing these letters knowing that he will walk that road and that the

Lord Jesus and the eternal life given to him in Christ and the proclamation of the gospel in the world means it's worth it number six suffering this is verses 17 and 18 suffering is to be viewed in keeping

with and in proportion to the judgment and justice of God listen to that again suffering is to be viewed in keeping with and in proportion to the judgment and justice of God look at verses 17 and 18 for it is time says Peter for judgment to begin with the family of God that great sifting process has begun in the gospel age and if it begins with us what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of

God and from the book of Proverbs if it is hard for the righteous to be saved and to endure what will become of the ungodly and the sinner from the moment of the resurrection onwards as soon as the gospel of the risen Christ was being taught and proclaimed by his apostles and by the earliest believers the sifting of men's hearts was beginning because every time the gospel is proclaimed people will either respond and repent and turn towards the Lord Jesus or we humans will bit by bit harden our hearts against him so as the gospel is taught even within the family of God that sifting process Peter says is already beginning and as it does there is this tendency for Christian people to think that those who are sinful and opposed to the gospel are somehow getting away with it they are able to lord it over the

Christians in prison in the first century and they go home at the end of the day and have their supper as the Christians are left languishing in the prison cell chained to their Roman guard and all mouths will finally be silenced there will never be full and final justice in this world although we are very very glad to have systems and the rule of law that work towards it but we sense the longing for justice when for example a sentence given out by a judge is deemed to be too shallow or too weak and somebody who's lost their loved one or something says he's going to walk free after five years or whatever it is we feel that sense of rage or when a prisoner or a criminal or somebody who has committed heinous crimes takes their own life and somebody at some stage will say well they've got away with it and we as the

Christian think no they haven't there is a higher and final court in this world and Peter says here if it's hard for us to be persecuted for the gospel and we're conscious of the pain and the agony of brothers and sisters going through the most horrific situations because they follow Jesus if that is hard Peter says don't underestimate what the outcome is for those who inflict the pain and do not obey the gospel please remember he says that God holds the scales of justice and in the final day when all justice is dished out there will not be a single solitary sentence from any voice saying that it's unfair what a wonderful thing to know as

[ 33 : 25 ] Christian people and to keep in mind and to remember that all suffering in this world particularly suffering inflicted on others in wickedness can be viewed in proportion to the justice of God finally number seven as he sums up in verse 19 so then having said that those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good this is the remarkable thing about Christian persecution Christians are persecuted having done nothing wrong the Christian gospel comes into the world as the only message of salvation for men and women proclaiming a savior who is loving beyond compare proclaiming a family to belong to the world over proclaiming the only possibility of human beings being reunited to their creator proclaimed by people who are willing to serve in

Christ's name and to give up their rights and to let go of ambition in this world for the sake of others to belong to Christ what is there to hate he would imagine that why why would there ever be such a thing as a persecuted Christian when Christians serve the world in love and live in godly harmony with one another and put others needs before their own and go so far as to love their enemy when Christians live like that who would ever persecute such a person who would be tempted to think it will never happen but quite the opposite is the case because of the sinful human heart that finds it deeply offensive to have a gospel light shone on it which shows that person's own heart and mind their own need for salvation why the witness of the

Christian church throughout the world is both good news and a unacceptably offensive and unique message to those who want to be lord of their own lives and rulers in God's world that's the problem isn't it so Peter says when it happens carry on commit yourself to a lovely phrase your faithful creator and continue to do good commit yourself to your faithful creator you may be living in the presence of a wicked destroyer but you commit yourself to a faithful creator he made you he died for you right now as you're suffering for him he is with you by his spirit he will hold you and will never let you go commit yourself to him and continue to do good keep going carry on let the world see and hear and

Christ Jesus on the last day will deal with all the rest amen well let's just pray for a moment heavenly father we wonder ourselves if we are sometimes spared direct persecution for the gospel because we're not yet fully prepared to live consistently under that yoke so strengthen us tonight we pray through your word build into the very foundation of our lives the thinking that enables us the wholesome thinking that enables us as Peter says to commit ourselves to you our faithful creator come what may whatever anyone says about you or about us as your followers help us to take the next step for the next day the next week doing good in your name and to know that you are with us in it we do pause

Lord to pray for brothers and sisters tonight who are suffering greatly for their faith and pray that you would be as you promise with them by your spirit in Jesus name we ask it Amen