

The more I read the Gospels, the more I realise “Jesus wasn’t a very good salesman.” And the more I read the letters of the Apostles, I realise “They weren’t very good salesmen either.”

You see, if Jesus’ main aim was to attract people to ‘His cause’, He hardly would’ve said “If you want to be my Disciple, you have to take up your cross to follow Me – in other words, be prepared to die.”

Actually, there was a bloke, walking through St George this week, carrying a cross (about 3m long). (he drives from town to town, and then walks through the town, dragging the cross) And his aim is to introduce people to Jesus....

*Now, that’s not what Jesus meant, when He said, “Whoever’s going to follow me, has to carry his cross” And I’m pretty sure this bloke knows that, but when I was talking to him on Tuesday, I asked him “how it was going”, and he said “Yeah”, he’d copped a bit of criticism from a few people (including Christians)...” But that **is** what Jesus meant, when He said we have to be prepared to carry our cross. – he’s willing to be criticised for the sake of Jesus.*

....

And if **Peter’s** main aim was to attract people to ‘the cause’, I don’t think he would’ve written this bit that we’re studying today.

And maybe that’s why many preachers don’t preach on passages like this one – it’s not a good sales pitch. And the

biggest and fastest growing churches in the Western world today, like to concentrate on the bits that **do** sell:

- A good life;
- Eternal life;
- Blessings – **lots** of blessings;
- Freedom – Freedom from:
 - Sin;
 - Pain;
 - Suffering;
 - Poverty;
 - Disease;
- Healing;
- Joy;
- Good times;

That's the sort of stuff that sells ... You imagine, if you heard 2 different versions of the gospel being preached, and one says:

- Come to Jesus and be blessed with all sorts of wonderful things, and if you have enough faith, your life will be wonderful and care-free;

and the other is the Gospel that Jesus preached, and it's the message that Peter preached

- Eternal life, but with that glory, comes suffering. And in fact, the suffering comes first. The message that Christians will suffer (and that's the will of God), because as we suffer (for the sake of Jesus), we connect more fully with the sufferings of Christ, and we will be blessed with Christ.

Now, which sales-pitch do you think will get the most converts...

Because we work our way through whole books of the Bible (and don't leave anything out), have you noticed how often we've been getting teaching on persecution & suffering, and about remaining strong in our faith in Jesus, even in persecution? It keeps coming up (doesn't it) And there's a reason it keeps coming up.

What we need to understand, is "Suffering for the sake of Jesus, is a normal part of the Christian life." It's **normal** for Christians to be persecuted, and to suffer for Jesus...

Never (since the church first began) has there ever been a time, when there has been no Christian persecution anywhere in the world.

At times, in certain localities and cultures, persecution has waned, but that's an anomaly – that's not normal...

And for Christians in western society, we've been **massively** sheltered from persecution, because our culture has been 'Christianised'. That doesn't mean everybody was a Christian, or that even the majority were true Christians, but:

- Our laws very much reflected God's laws;

- Our sense of morality was founded on Biblical principles; and
- It was generally thought as 'honourable' to be a regular church-goer...

But times-are-a-changing... Over the last half-century, our society is being systematically 'deChristianised'... Now, I want to say here, "That doesn't mean that there are any less Christians". There may be less people in church on a Sunday, but that's just because the unbelievers don't feel they should go to church anymore.

And I actually believe that's a good thing. *If you were in an army, and only 30% of the troops were loyal, that'd be a terrible thing – you'd go into battle, and you wouldn't know "Who's got your back", and "Who's going to stab you in the back." And I don't know about you, but I would rather be in a church of 10 loyal disciples of Jesus, than 100 who didn't really believe.*

And so I believe the Christian church is poised to become much more effective agents of God in the world, because there's fewer unbelievers to muck us about.

And as these times-are-a-changing for the Christians in the west – we're coming back to how Christianity **used** to be...

Christianity was once **counter** to the culture, and it is again. And because Christianity is once again 'different to the culture' and it once again stands in opposition to our culture, Christianity is becoming more and more despised. And Christians are more often being:

- Abused;

- Insulted;
- Ridiculed;
- Targeted; and
- Attacked

In my grandparents day, a minister or a pastor (rightly/wrongly) were automatically given respect and honour in the community... Today, that's a rarity, and they're more likely to be viewed with suspicion. And by many people, they're default position, is to disrespect them, and to see them as objects of ridicule...

Leaders of churches will cop it the most, but so will other active Christians.

And what the Scriptures have to say about persecution and remaining faithful to Jesus, is becoming more and more (not only relevant) but **essential** for our development as effective disciples of Jesus...

And I want to sound a warning today: If a church rarely gives teaching about persecution, and about how to remain faithful to our Lord, it's probably a sign that that church has happily absorbed worldly culture, and therefore, that church aren't offensive to the world...

Now, Peter was a Jew. The Jews were used to being persecuted. They still are. Anti-Semitism is what it's called.

But Peter's writing to a people who were Gentiles, and they weren't used to being persecuted.

And they probably would've thought, OK, if I leave behind my old life of sin, and I become a Christian, then things should go pretty well for me, hey... I mean, our Heavenly Father is the Lord God Almighty... He is our strength; comfort; protection... Things should go good for me.

But the tentacles of persecution were reaching out from Rome, and was beginning to touch them.

And so Peter says:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

What's this fiery trial? Well, throughout history, **severe** persecution often involves Christians being burned at the stake. And remember, right at the beginning of this series of 1 Peter, we set the scene of what things were like, and how Nero would paint Christians in pitch (tar), and set them on fire, to light up his garden at night...

And so, when Peter mentions a fiery trial, they probably know very well, what he's talking about... But I think Peter's telling us more than this. It's a **trial** – it's a **test**. Right back in 1:7, he talked about how persecutions – these trials, test the genuineness of our faith; and he talked about how Gold is

tested by fire. Alright, when you melt the gold, all the impurities burn off, and you're just left with pure gold...

(maybe it's not as simple as that, but remember, Peter wasn't a metallurgist – he was a fisherman), and it still makes a pretty good analogy.

But what he's saying is "Don't think that this ought not to happen... It's normal"...

And rather than saying to yourself, "This can't be right", **Rejoice**, because by suffering for Christ, we're actually identifying with Christ, in the sufferings that **He** went through...

That's a big thing, isn't it... You know, some people think that Christians are wimps... No way. From the time we set out following Jesus, we know this is going to be a hard road. And we rejoice and are glad in the midst of suffering, because we know that this is the way of our Lord.

And **if** we are insulted and ridiculed for the Name of Christ, we are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us... What's that mean?

The Holy Spirit, is God's stamp of approval. And in times of trial and persecution, it's Holy Spirit Who keeps us strong. And Peter understood this very well. Do you know the difference between the Peter, who when questioned by a little servant girl, denied Jesus... And the Peter who was crucified

upside down for Jesus? Do you know what the difference was? Holy Spirit. After Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, and He would never deny Jesus again.

Jesus said: Matthew 10: (ESV) ¹⁹ **When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.** ²⁰ **For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.**

Alright, when we go through times of trial and persecution, we're not alone... And we're actually on the threshold of glory.

When the very first Christian martyr was murdered for witnessing for Jesus (Stephen was his name):

Acts 7:55 **full of the Holy Spirit**, [he] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

And they smashed him with rocks until his skull was crushed (that's what stoning is).

Stephen was blessed, because the Spirit of **glory** and of **God** rested upon Him,, and he even saw it... And even in his death, he rejoiced...

Why would we ever rejoice in persecution? Well, I guess one reason is because we're heading straight to glory, but Peter gives us another reason – We share in Christ's sufferings.

We will follow Jesus, wherever He goes – even through suffering. If being a disciple of Jesus, is about following Jesus; and if at the cross, is where we see Christ at His greatest, when we also suffer for Christ, this is where our footsteps are closest to His.

But it's not about suffering, for suffering's sake.

It might seem like a strange thing to say to a church, but:

- there's no benefit if you suffer for being a murderer. Alright, if I murder somebody, I deserve to be punished. That's what justice is.
- There's no benefit, if I suffer for being a thief. If I steal stuff, I deserve to be punished. That's what justice is.
- He says if you suffer for being an 'evildoer' – alright, that's a criminal offence of some other kind. If I'm a criminal, I deserve to be punished. That's what justice is.
- But then he steps away from criminality, and he says "If you suffer for being a meddler/busybody", there's no reward in that.

Basically, what he's saying is, "If you stick your nose in other people's business, and for that reason, you cop-a-flogging, - there's no reward in that. I think, something he's getting at

here, is if we Christians try to legislate and force **our** morality onto the Godless, and we suffer because of that, there's no reward in that.

In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says, "What business do I have judging those outside the church – it's those inside the church we're supposed to judge – God will judge the ones outside"ⁱ.

And I think this is what **Peter's** getting at. As Christians, how we live, will be very different to how the world lives.

Because we've received the Grace and mercy of God, and **because** we've been filled with the Holy Spirit, we choose to honour/obey God live by Kingdom of God principles... But, how could we ever expect someone who's not saved, (and not filled with Holy Spirit) to uphold the same Kingdom of God principles...

Jesus didn't come to judge the world, so why would we become his 'morality police' in his absence? I have no business, telling somebody of the world, how they should live. Oh yes, we ache and grieve over sin in this Godless world, but we're not busybodies who try to force our morality onto the Godless.

Alright, so if we suffer for criminal behaviour, or for meddling as busybodies (sticking our nose in where it doesn't belong), there's no reward in that. ¹⁶ **Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.**

Pop-quiz: how many times does the word “Christian” appear in the New Testament? (Under 100/20/10) 3 times – twice in Acts, and once in this letter that Peter wrote.

And the reason it doesn't come up that often, is because it's **not** the term that Christians used to describe themselves. (Believers; Disciples) The label “Christian” was a was a term used by unbelievers – to them it was a derogatory term (Oww, you Christians) - it was a word of ridicule....

But now, to us, to disciples of Jesus, we're proud to take the name “Christian”, aren't we... And this is the first record in the Bible, of taking pride in what was **intended** to be a term of ridicule. Don't be ashamed to suffer as a Christian. Glorify God in, not only being **called** a Christian, but **suffering** for being a Christian.

And in some settings, and amongst some groups (even in our own nation today), the identity of being a “Christian”, has once again, become a label of scorn, and we've become objects of ridicule... But don't ever be ashamed to be identified as a Christian. Glory in that name.

Anyway:

It all comes down to justice. If we suffer for doing wrong, that's just. But if we suffer for being Christians, that's **unjust**, and God will make it right, with His own judgment.

V17 says ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God

Now, hang on a minute, when we become Christians, doesn't that **save** us from the judgment of God??? And now Peter's telling us that judgment **begins** with the household of God....

Well, let's not confuse "judgment" with "sentence" or "Judgment" with "retribution". Judgment is about determining innocent/guilty; or in this case, determining spiritually alive/dead... Remember, back in V5 (2 weeks ago), we talked about the judgment living/dead – those who are alive in Christ, are spiritually alive, and those who reject Christ, are spiritually dead.

And so persecution (suffering because we are Christians) is a test: Are we fair dinkum followers of Jesus? Have we truly forsaken the world, to embrace Christ? It's 'testing the metal' as it were...

And so judgment begins with the household of God.

In Ezekiel 9, Ezekiel is given a picture of the judgment of God on Jerusalem. And He began at the temple (it begins at the house of God, where those who should be closest to God are). And he says "Go through and mark everyone who sighs and groans, over the evil and abominations that are happening in the city"... And they're the ones who are going to be saved. You see, that was the judgment.

Being at the temple didn't automatically make you one of God's people. It was those whose heart was like God's heart, who would be saved. And this is what Peter's reflecting on:

Ezekiel 9. Judgment begins with the household of God. Persecution is a test – Are we truly His? Or are we just dipping our toes in the water of Christianity??? Are we willing to suffer for Christ?

And he says: and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Alright, the suffering for persecuted Christians, is temporary. As Peter puts it, we entrust our souls to the faithful Creator. The one who made us, will keep us... But things aren't going to go well, for those who have rejected Christ.

If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

You see, if faithfulness to Jesus (under persecution) is a test, how many of us are capable of passing that test?

Often when I'm having a serious discussion with somebody (one-on-one) about persecution, almost without exception, they'll say, "I like to think that if it ever comes to it, that I would stand strong in the faith, and never deny Jesus, but until I'm in that position, how will I know???"

And I think most of us have probably considered this. And you know what – I love Jesus with all my heart, but am I brave enough withstand torture and never deny Jesus???

Well, in reality, I may **not** brave enough; **I** may **not** be strong enough... But **God** is.

And this is why **the righteous is scarcely saved** . We can't save ourselves. We're saved by the blood of Jesus. It's by the grace of God that we're saved, and it's by the grace/mercy/strength of God, that He keeps us (even in the time of trial).

When our faith is put to the test, this is how we can **know**, that we **will** stand strong... With the confession of Christ in our mouth, and the Holy Spirit in our heart. And the **Lord** will give us strength... Don't you be afraid that you're going to be too weak. We just have to have faith and love.

V¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

That's going to really mess with the theology some folk... There's a false gospel, that tells us that it's never God's will for us to suffer. Rubbish... Don't ever feel that if you are suffering, and especially if you're suffering persecution, it's because God's abandoned you. It is part of the normal Christian life. And if we're not being persecuted, that's actually an anomaly.

So, what do we do?

We entrust our souls to a faithful Creator; and we do good.

God's 'got this'. Do you believe that??? If God can create the universe and everything in it, He can keep us. He's 'got this'... That's something we don't need to worry about...

All we have to do, is **know** that He's 'got this', and do good – in other words, as that great old hymn says, “Trust and Obey”...

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
We confess that we're just not too sure of ourselves.
Will we stand the test,
And remain faithful to Jesus;
And never deny Him.

Even if we're being tortured;
Even if our families are threatened...

But Lord, we choose this day, who we will serve;
And we know that it's not in our own strength that we
will remain faithful...

We depend entirely on You.

Lord,
Give us strength;
Give us courage;
Give us love;

Endurance;
And hearts to do good...

And Lord,
we know there are Christians who are (this very day)
suffering horrendously for Your sake.

Lord, be near them;
Keep them strong;

To Your glory;
Amen.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 5:9–13 (ESV)

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—
¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?
¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."