

"Suffering in a Modern World"

(Scot McKnight)

An obvious point of departure for application concerns the suffering of the believers in Asia Minor, along with Peter's instructions on how to perceive and endure such sufferings, and then contrast this point with the lack of suffering that takes place in the postmodern West. I begin by contending that *our lack of suffering is, in part, due to a lack of nerve on the part of the church to challenge our contemporary world with the message of the cross and to live according to the teachings of Jesus with uncompromising rigor*. While the Bible never states that every Christian of every age will always suffer, Paul does state that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). I take this to be not an absolute prediction by Paul for all ages, but a general principle that is rooted in the nature of a fallen world, the kind of statement made so often in Proverbs. As a guiding principle, then, those who live faithful lives in an unbelieving world will find opposition to both their ideas and their practices.

There are, of course, exceptions. One simply has to imagine a fairly Christianized society (e.g., early nineteenth century United States in specific communities), where most of one's family and contacts were upright, godly men and women. In such a community one could live a godly life and not be persecuted. But this is not the case today for most people.

In other words, I am arguing that suffering, while it may not be as much a part of the every day fabric of our lives as it was when Peter was writing, should probably be more a part of our lives than it is. True, ours is an age of toleration and pluralism. These two characteristic virtues clearly retard a society's inclination to persecute. Nor is our society as intense about its religious beliefs as other parts of the world, which inculcate both a quicker and more physical response to strange ideas and practices. But even if we bracket out our Western civility, the contrast between the Christian community's belief in the gospel as well as its commitment to holy living and our cultures unbelief in the gospel and its permissiveness ought to generate more sparks than it does. I contend that one of the reasons there are so few sparks is because the fires of commitment and unswerving confession of the truth of the gospel are too frequently set on low flame, as if the church grows best if it only simmers rather than boils.

Accordingly, one of the reasons it is hard to apply this feature of 1 Peter to our world is our own problem. We should not then accuse the text of being hopelessly irrelevant; we can only accuse ourselves of being dormant and sleepy. I would also suggest, however, that we must recognize the change of cultures and the distance of time. First-century Asia Minor was made up of totally different kinds of people and religious groups from what we encounter today. With the moving ahead in time and the total change of society—that is, with our concentration of people into cities with a capitalistic culture (modernization), with our disintegration of a theological center for ascertaining meaning and morality (secularization), and with our multiplication of options and denial of the superiority of any one option (pluralization)—there is good reason for stepping back and saying that our culture and Peter's culture are simply different



and, therefore, his message about suffering will have to make some adaptations.

Accordingly, what we need to find in our world, if we want to apply this message to our situation with biblical fidelity, are analogies of experience that correspond significantly to first-century suffering. What would these look like? No matter what happens, it qualifies for "being suffering" only if the *opposition occurs exclusively because someone is a Christian*. This is why we have to link suffering and salvation together. Flat tires happen because of sharp objects and thin tires, not because someone is a Christian. Bad events in life happen to good, God-fearing people, but bad events in life are not necessarily events of persecution. We need to find events that occur against people as a result of human opposition, that occur solely because of that person's stand for the gospel of salvation and a decision to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. As an extension of this, sometimes Christians may be opposed at a more indirect level (say politically) because of a stand for the gospel of Jesus. Thus, a Christian's stand at the personal level may bring opposition at another level. I have seen conservatives oppose more liberal Christians at a political level when the liberal group was doing something for "all the right reasons" and their actions were noble and good; the opposition, one suspects, was generated at another level. And I have seen liberal groups oppose conservative political statements for the same kind of reasons.