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**I Peter 4:1-6**

## I Peter 4:1-6

This passage offers a couple of nagging problems not only for the casual reader but also for the most eminent scholars. One of these problems is complicated by the relationship of this passage to the passage immediately before it, namely, 3:18-22 (probably the most difficult passage in I Peter). Another major problem that must be dealt with in this passage is the meaning of the phrase “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” These two large problems (one at the beginning and one at the end of the passage) form an inclusio of difficulties! This paper attempts to deal with these and other problems in order to discover Peter’s intended meaning in this passage while keeping in view the question of how it relates to the overall purpose of his letter.

**Textual Criticism:** There are a surprising twenty five variants found in these six short verses! Of these twenty five there are eight that have only one or two witnesses. Three others insert prepositions that are clearly explanatory additions in that they merely serve to highlight the case of the word that follows. (They also have weak to very weak textual evidence.) In verse 1 there are two variants which insert a prepositional phrase in-between παθόντος σαρκί. These insertions are probably also additions even though Selwyn argues for the originality of ὑπερ ἡμῶν which does have significant external evidence. However, the insertion of either of these two prepositional phrases would serve only to strengthen the idea of redemption that is already present because of the connection with the previous passage. The dative ἁμαρτίαις could have easily been changed from the genitive ἁμαρτίας (which has more support from external evidence) in order to match ἐπιθυμίαις in verse 2. In verse 3 some manuscripts insert ὑμῖν or ἡμῖν after γὰρ. Although either of these could fit into Peter’s expression, neither is necessary. Also, the textual evidence greatly favors our text in that it “is strongly supported by good representatives of both the Alexandrian and the Western types of text.”<sup>1</sup> The rest of our text for verse 3 is equally well established by the sheer amount and weight of the textual witnesses that weigh against the other variants. Verse 4 has a variant that can be explained by the fact that the present active participle (βλασφημοῦντες) seems awkward here and a scribe might have seen it best to replaced it with a finite verb. The external evidence is also well in favor of our text. The last textual variant that needs to be addressed is

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* third edition (West Germany: United Bible Societies, 1975) pp. 694-695.

found in verse 5. The two variants that are not in our text, among other things, omit the word ἔχοντι. The external evidence is somewhat divided but still rules in the favor of its inclusion. It is hard to see how it would ever have been added if it was not in the original. Scribes may have omitted it and altered the remaining text if they thought that a form of the verb “I have” seemed strange here. At this point then, our text stands defended in its entirety.

**Pertinent Background Information:** Assuming that Peter is the author of I Peter (1:1) and that it was written from Rome (5:13) about 62-64 AD during the reign of Nero (before the fire) to Christians in Asia Minor (1:1), some additional items can be inferred. The Christians in Asia Minor were probably mostly Gentiles (1:14, 18, 4:3, especially 2:10). Thus, they would probably need encouragement (at the least!) to break with their past way of life which they had, in fact, inherited (probably including such things as “sensuality, evil passions, acts of drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and unlawful idolatries” as seen in 4:3). Ernest Best makes a very good observation about the persecution that would undoubtedly erupt in a situation like this: “The beginnings of Christian work in the so-called missionary countries remind us that where Christians are a minority rejecting much of the traditional cultural, religious and social set-up, they are open to sporadic persecution at the hands of mobs, groups who may feel their position or privileges threatened, or even of individuals to whom they may stand in some special relationship (slave to master, or wife to husband).”<sup>2</sup> Though there is no historical evidence that they were suffering as a result of official persecution there is no question that the Christians to whom Peter was writing were undergoing persecution of some kind (1:6-7, 3:13-17, 4:12-19, 5:9). Surely there were those who were known as Christians who would be tempted to go back to their old way of life rather than endure this persecution. Although there were instances of persecution to the point of death already this early in the history of the Church (ex. Stephen in Acts 7:54-60, James the Just, etc.) “martyrdom” was not particularly what Peter had in mind. Although death certainly could have been a possibility, Peter sees his readers as surviving (4:19). (In fact, there was a purpose in it as seen in 4:12-13, 1:6-7.) Suffering was seen as something common to all Christians (4:17, 5:9) Indeed, Jesus even foretold as much (Mark 13:13). Peter writes, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal in your midst” (4:12) because it is nothing “strange”. With all of this as background, the persecution was probably severe but included nothing routinely extreme (i.e. martyrdom). It at least

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Best, *I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p. 36.

included verbal abuse (3:16, 4:4, 14), false accusations (2:12, 3:13-17), and suffering for doing well (2:20).

**Contexts:** 4:1-6 begins with οὖν and a Genitive Absolute. Both of these items point back to 3:18 (which speaks of the redemptive suffering of Christ) and thus serve to connect the two passages. Both passages portray Christ as our example when he suffered for doing what was right. Those who become part of God's people are expected to exhibit a radical change of behavior even if it means that they have to suffer because of it.

In verse 5, "The One who is ready to judge the living and the dead" is an eschatological reference to the coming final judgment of God. This serves as a reminder that those who do evil will be condemned while those who do good will be rewarded. In this way the readers are exhorted to continue in holiness. In the first verse of the next section (4:7) Peter writes, "The end of all things is near". This is also a reference to the eschaton. Here again the readers are encouraged to do what is right "so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

**Statement of Intention:** This passage perpetuates Peter's main purpose, namely, to exhort (5:12) the Christians who are suffering to endure (2:20, 4:19) and to continue in holiness (1:13-16, 2:11-12, 3:13). The logical organization is as follows: Christ is shown to be an example for those who are suffering. The one who "arms" himself with the same attitude towards suffering that Christ had (and thus endures it) shows that he/she "has ceased from sin". This results in a life that is no longer lived according to evil desires (which were part of the old way of life) but "according to the will of God". When faced with "pressure" to return to the "old ways" they are to remember that Christ is ready to judge all men, whether living or dead, by his holy standard. Those who live "according to the will of God" should have no fear of judgment because "they permanently enjoy the benefit of Christ's death, that is new abiding spiritual life in fellowship with God."<sup>3</sup>

**Commentary:** The οὖν in verse 1 shows that Peter is about to draw a conclusion based on what he previously wrote. As mentioned above, the genitive absolute Χριστοῦ παθόντος provides preliminary information: "Christ suffered in the flesh". ("Flesh" is a "neutral" term throughout the passage. It seems to indicate physical suffering but cannot be restricted to it. The sense is locatival not adverbial.) There is some debate over whether this refers specifically to Christ's death or to his

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<sup>3</sup> A.M. Stibbs-A.F. Walls, *I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959) p. 147.

suffering in general. Since Peter could have used a different word for “death” (cf. 3:18) and since Christ’s death cannot be excluded from his suffering anyway, I favor the general sense of suffering. ὀπλίσασθε, “arm or equip yourselves”, is a military term used figuratively here as a metaphor for “prepare yourselves for persecution”.<sup>4</sup> ἐννοιαὶ can either mean “thought”, “knowledge”, “insight”,<sup>5</sup> or some say “attitude”. ὅτι causes some major problems at this point in that it can mean either “because” or “that”. If it is to be taken to mean “that” then it would indicate the content of the “thought” in the phrase that follows. If it is to be taken to mean “because” then it would indicate the reason why one should have the same “thought” as Christ concerning suffering. (Bigg, Best, and Blazen argue for “because” while Walls-Stibbs and Kelly argue for “that”.) The deciding factor in this is how one relates the next phrase to Christ. (i.e. is this “the same thought” that he had as he suffered? etc.) Of course, there is even more controversy here! There seems to be four main options that commentators take.<sup>6</sup> The first option (which is held by Selwyn, Bennett and Wand) is that the sufferer is purified from sin if the suffering is borne rightly. In this view, suffering seems to have an unavoidable redemptive quality. The second view (held by Bigg and Knopf) stresses that πέπαυται is middle not passive. The meaning is therefore not “he has been delivered from the power or guilt of sin,” but “he has ceased to do evil.”<sup>7</sup> A third view (which apparently was held in the “later” church) is that “martyrdom itself might be considered to atone for sin.” This option can be ruled out right away because the context can not be limited to “death”. A fourth view (held by Beare, Blazen, Kelly, Dalton, Cranfield and Walls-Stibbs) views “suffering” as identical with “dying” but in a non-literal sense of “dying”. This brings in the Pauline concept of death with Christ to sin symbolized in baptism. Arguments in favor of the fourth view are 1) a general affinity to Pauline thought in I Peter (this is not denied), 2) the presence of baptism in the immediate context (3:21), and 3) “past” sense (aorist) and not the present tense with reference to it. But the objections are stronger: 1) the Pauline conception of the believer’s identification with the death of Christ is not found elsewhere in I Peter and it seems that this would be a strained way to introduce it, 2) if this idea is introduced here it would seem out of place in a section intended to exhort

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest Best, *I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> W. Bauer-W.F. Arndt-F.W. Gingrich-F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, second edition) p. 267a.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Best, *I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> C. Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and Jude* (ICC) (Edinburgh, 1901) p. 167.

Christians who are in a period of persecution, 3) the text does not require that “suffering” be taken figuratively as “dying”, therefore, it is more natural to take “suffering” as “suffering”, 4) even Paul does not equate “dying with Christ in baptism” with “suffering”, and 5) Peter seems to always use ἁμαρτίας (“sin” - singular) in the concrete sense of “act of sin” (2:22, II Peter 2:14) which is different than Paul’s view of the state or power of sin. With the resulting understanding of the concreteness of the sin in view combined with the aorist “having suffered” Best modifies the first two options (which are the only ones remaining at this point) and gets: 1) individual acts of suffering purify the sufferer from actual concrete sins, and 2) individual acts of suffering lead to the conquest of actual concrete sins. He opts for a combination of both and so determines that ὅτι cannot mean “that” (because if it did then the verse would be saying that Christ had the thought of purifying himself from concrete sin). He is quick to warn, however, that this idea should not be extended to say that “suffering frees the Christian from all sin for ever.”<sup>8</sup> I think that there is still a problem with option one. Although suffering can no doubt discipline a man, I do not think that it is clear that it can purify him, in any way, from sins. Best, himself, hints at this problem. Selwyn notes from experience that “suffering in itself often hardens and embitters men, and makes them more resolute in evil causes.”<sup>9</sup> But might this not be exactly why Peter writes “arm yourselves with the same thought” that Christ had? Thankfully (or not!), there is one more voice to be heard from on this point. M. J. Harris notes the “strangeness of the phrase”, namely, the perfect tense and the anarthrous nouns. He suggests (as have others) that the whole phrase may be gnomic and, therefore, is in a sense an overstated proverb (and not a restatement of Romans 6:7). The sense then is that suffering “reduces or destroys sinfulness” but does not “result in sinlessness” (i.e. it *tends* “to destroy”; not “destroyed”). Therefore, the phrase is more of an observation about an encouraging possibility rather than a theological statement.

What remains to be answered is what was the thought that Christ had when he was suffering? It has been determined that 4:1 does not tell us. 2:21-23 tell us that Jesus is to be our example and that he **endured suffering** without reviling or making threats. Therefore, following Christ as our example, we are to prepare ourselves for suffering with the determination to endure it. The next verse tells us why.

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Best, *I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London, 1946) p. 209.

Kelly, Walls-Stibbs, Beare and Best all take εἰς as purpose or final. Verse 2 then, is the reason for arming oneself. It is understandable that the Gentile Christians of Asia Minor who were new at being “the people of God” (1:1) might be tempted to return to their old ways of life if it would mean not having to suffer any more. 4:12 indicates that they thought it strange that they should have to suffer because of their “religion”. Surely this was a new experience for people from a society where polytheism was acceptable! Peter exhorts them to live out the rest of their lives governed by (instrumental dative) the will of God and not by evil human passions. In verse 3 Peter reminds them of what they may have taken part in before they became identified with God’s people (2:10). Kelly says that ἀρκετὸς can be used ironically: “more than enough.”<sup>10</sup> The three perfects in verse 3 emphasize the “pastness” of their previous ways. The catalogue of vices parallels two other lists (one in Rom. 13:13-14 and the other in Gal. 5:20-21) although several of the words (in verse 4 as well) are rare.

In verse 4, those who continue to be identified with the items in the catalogue of vices are said to be “surprised” that “you no longer rush with them into the same excess of reckless living”. This surprise soon changes to something harsher. βλασφημοῦντες is a present participle that occurs when one might expect a finite verb. This has caused some confusion (see material on textual variants above). It could be taken as a substantive which would translate as “Blasphemers!” or “blasphemers that they are”. It could also be taken as “slandering God” or as “speaking slanderously of someone”. The later is better in the context but does not exclude the former because insults against God’s people are insults against God. As in some cultures today, all civic and national activities of the ancient world were bound up with heathen religious ceremonies. “There is plenty of evidence, from pagan as well as Christian sources, that it was precisely the reluctance of Christians to participate in the routine of contemporary life, particularly conventionally accepted amusements, civic ceremonies, and any function involving contact with idolatry or what they considered immorality, that caused them to be hated, despised and themselves suspected of illicit practices.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (HNTC) (Harper and Row: New York, 1969) p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (HNTC) (Harper and Row: New York, 1969) p. 171.

Verse 5 is not so much a warning but a reminder to the Christians who are being slandered that those who follow the path that they themselves once were on (and may be tempted to get “side-tracked” again) will have a soon and sure end. Christ is ready to judge the living and the dead. This includes those who are doing the slandering! τῷ ἐτοίμῳ ἔχοντι might look strange but “as in English, adverbs tend to be used instead of adjectives of states of health. However, English uses ‘to be’ while Greek uses ‘ἔχω’.”<sup>12</sup>

It might have been better for us to stop looking at this passage at verse 5 but it continues with εἰς τοῦτο at the beginning of verse 6! The most obvious question to ask is “Who are ‘the dead?’ “ Again, there are a number of possibilities: 1) the spiritually dead (but this would require a present tense verb for “preached” and also, νεκροῖς must have the same meaning in verse 6 as it does in verse 5. Note the chiasm in verses 5 and 6 with “living” and “dead”.), 2) the righteous dead of the OT (again, there is a change in meaning from verse 5), 3) Christians who have died since they were preached to (Selwyn, Kelly, and Kalton)—(but “dead” is not qualified here), 4) all who are physically dead, and who are in this state when they hear what is preached (Beare and Best)—(the meaning is not changed here, but this would seem to make the argument irrelevant and Best tries to qualify it with his argument that the Gospel was being offered to those who never had the opportunity to hear while they were alive). Some who take 3:19 as preaching to people who sinned in Noah’s time see a parallel with 4:6. They would go with option 4. But the background of verse 6 seems to be (by way of inference based on the response at the end of the verse) a concern about the lot of the martyred Christian dead or a fear that the death of Christians was an indication of God’s judgment (I Thes. 4). So if κριθῶσι refers to Christians who were alive when Christ was preached to them then the verse does not refer to 3:19. Also, “dead” does not have to change its meaning at all under option 3 if they were alive when they were preached to and then subsequently died. I go with option 3. This would serve to reassure the suffering Christians that they should continue to endure knowing that they will be in God’s presence someday even if they do have to die first.

**Conclusion:** Peter’s message in this passage to the suffering Christians in Asia Minor is that, because they have in Christ an example of how to suffer they should be determined to endure knowing that sinfulness will be reduced. Now that they are God’s people they should live the rest

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<sup>12</sup> ↑ C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* p. 161.

of their lives governed by the will of God. Though they may still have to die (if the Lord tarries)  
they will live eternally before God.

# SERMON OUTLINE

**Title:** Armed but not Dangerous!

**Text:** I Peter 4:1-6

**Purpose of Text in Book:** To encourage Christians in the midst of suffering to live lives governed by God's will.

**Homiletical Statement:** Don't try to avoid suffering at any cost, endure and be pure!

I. Prepare to suffer

A. Christ is our example

B. Have his same attitude

II. Don't look back

A. Be governed by God's will

B. You have had more than enough of sin

III. Look to the future

A. Don't sin to avoid suffering

B. Endure the world's abuse

C. Christ is the judge

D. Your destiny - the Presence of God!