

## ***Be Ready to Suffer for Doing What Is Right • 1 Peter 3:13-22***

My name is Gu Xiangmei. I am a 32-year-old female. My home is at No. 18 of Hangyu Dongzhen in Xinye County, Nangyann, Henan. I was sentenced to two years in prison because I believe in God.

At about ten o'clock in the evening of March 22, 2001, I was getting ready to go to bed. Suddenly Li Bin, assistant director of Xinye police station, climbed over the wall surrounding my house and broke in.

Li Bin forced me to give him the key to my father-in-law's house. Li opened the door and searched that house also. The police did not find anything except a set of cassettes of praising songs and hardcover, God, You're Great, in the back room.

In the end, Li Bin got me into their car and took me to the Hang Yun police station, Xinye County. During my jail time in Xinhang police station, Li Bin interrogated me five times. He used electric shock on me, and pinched my fingers and back with pliers. I lost consciousness several times because of the pain. Li Bin tried to force me to admit that I worshiped God. I kept silent all the time so they couldn't get anything from me. Then Li Bin sent me to Xinye County detention house.

In the detention house, I am exhausted every day, and I don't get enough to eat. In the morning we are given a small bowl of thin noodles and hard, steamed bread, and in the evening we only get a bowl of thin noodles, which we call "tiger's diarrhea."

On April 19, Xinye County police sentenced me to be in prison for two years for associating with cults and breaking the law. Li Bin and Liyanpu handcuffed me and took me to Shibali Women's Labor-Edu-

cation Center in Zhangzhou, where I have been ever since.

I wonder if Gu Xiangmei had a Bible in the Women's Labor-Education Center. And if she did have a Bible I wonder how often she read the words of I Peter 3:13-15:

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.*

There are parts of this section of the New Testament that are very difficult to understand. However, the central message is clear and unambiguous. Here, in I Peter 3, we have the 12<sup>th</sup> of Peter's twenty principles on how Christians are to live when life gets tough. It is a challenging principle for many 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. We often expect life to be easy. Some of us believe that God owes us pleasure and happiness. In fact, some of us become angry with God when life does not go our way. We certainly do not expect to suffer. And yet number twelve of Peter's 20 principles tells us to be ready to suffer, even for doing what is right!

This raises an interesting question: Do you think suffering will be a significant part of your life? Here is what Peter tells us to do: First, be ready with what you think.

Peter starts out by saying that most of us probably will not be harmed for doing good: "*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?*" Two truths are woven into this rhetorical question. The first truth is that most of us are never going to be harmed for doing good deeds. Usually, when we do good things others like us. Christians who do good are great employees, good neighbors, fine friends and wonderful family members. We are hardly likely to be harmed.

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On the other hand, God promises to protect us from ultimate harm. While a Christian may be killed for doing good, God will give eternal life and thereby protect from ultimate harm.

*“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.”* The assumption is that Christians will suffer. There come times in life when we do everything right and still suffer. We tell the truth and are accused of lying. We are honest in business and get fired as if we had done something wrong. We do everything right and it turns out wrong.

Peter says that when that happens you are blessed. A basic meaning of “blessed” is “happy”. At first this seems crazy. Why would anyone be happy about suffering? But it’s not that we’re happy about suffering. The happiness is about doing what is right. Christians experience deep delight and satisfaction in doing what is good and right for God regardless of the outcome. We delight to do good for God and for goodness’ sake.

We do not have to be frightened. *“Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.”* Peter assumes here that those who create problems for Christians are afraid of Christians. They are afraid of truth. They are afraid of God. They are afraid of good. That fear has overtaken them and they want to instill their fear into those they persecute.

Don’t be afraid of them. Don’t let them make us afraid. As Christians our confidence is in God. We believe that regardless of the circumstances God is ultimately in control and will eventually turn everything for good so we center our lives on him, not around those who try to intimidate us for doing what is right.

All of these are ways Christians should set up this thinking before suffering starts. Now is the time to program the software of our minds. In advance, believe that we probably will not be harmed for doing good, that even if we suffer for doing what is right we are blessed and we do not have to be frightened by those who seek to harm us. We must make up our minds to think this way before suffering starts!

Peter writes on and says that just as we need to be ready for suffering in what we think, we also need to be ready in what we do. First of all

and most of all, *“in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.”* This is the single most important element of Christian living. Make a personal commitment that Jesus Christ is the Boss of your life. Believe in him, desire to serve him, agree to obey him. Commit in advance that you will go where he wants you to go and do what he wants you to do. If he says to celebrate you will celebrate. If he calls you to suffering you will suffer. The central control point of life is no longer reserved for self but for Jesus.

When my mother became a citizen of the United States she had to renounce loyalty to any other country, monarch or government and swore allegiance to the United States of America. When Charleen and I married I vowed, “I will cling to thee and to thee alone so long as we both shall live.”

Before we face suffering in our lives the Bible calls us to declare absolute, irrevocable and eternal allegiance to Jesus Christ as the Lord, Leader and Boss of our lives. Have you done that? If not, I invite you to do so today. It will be the best decision of your life. And, it will be a decision and a relationship to act upon when tough times come.

The second way to get ready for suffering is to always have an answer ready:

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

This assumes that Christians have hope in the worst of situations. Our hope comes from the Lordship of Jesus.

So how does that work? If we have hope when we are falsely accused, when we are abandoned by a spouse, when we are fired from a job or suffering from a terminal disease or grieving the death of a child—we will be asked, “Why?” Others will want to know how we can be positive when everything is so negative. They will want to know how we can keep faith when we are suffering so. They will want to know what we are thinking.

Peter says that we should be ready in advance to gently explain the difference Jesus makes in our lives. Tell them that you trust Jesus no matter how bad it gets or what happens. Tell them that it is better to belong to Jesus with everything going wrong than to not belong to Jesus with everything going right. Have an answer ready!

The third action to get ready for suffering is to be good for God’s sake. This is a totally Christian approach to life. As Christians we are committed to do what is good and right whether we get anything out of it or not. The usual approach to life is to do good to get ahead. Work hard to get a promotion and a raise. Be nice to people so they will be nice to you. Be generous with your money so that you will get richer in return. But the Christian approach is to do good because it is God’s will even if you end up suffering as a result. Peter writes in I Peter 3:17, *“It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”*

Okay, let’s review this. Before and during suffering here is how to think: We probably won’t be harmed; we are blessed; we do not have to be frightened. Before and during suffering here is what to do: Set apart Christ as Lord; have an answer ready; be good for God’s sake.

Peter finishes off this 12<sup>th</sup> principle by telling us what every Christian wants to hear—be like Jesus. And then he starts talking about Jesus. He says that Jesus suffered and died to bring us to God. In I Peter 3:18 we read, *“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”*

***That is what God does! He brings good out of bad.***

Jesus was so good that he was better than anyone else, yet he suffered and died. He is our Leader, our Lord, our Example. We can learn how to suffer like Christians by remembering how Jesus suffered.

While the main point here is that Jesus suffered and we can follow his example, I Peter 3:18 also teaches one of the single greatest truths in the Bible. There is a sense in which this is the whole Bible in one statement. Jesus was sinless and innocent. He took our sins and guilt on him-

self. He suffered and died on the cross to bring us forever to God. To be a Christian is to believe this and claim it for ourselves.

The next time we suffer for anything, let us remember how much Jesus suffered for us.

Next in Peter’s writing comes one of the most wonderful and difficult statements in the entire Bible. It starts out with a clear declaration of Jesus’ supernatural resurrection from the dead: *“He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”* Yes, Jesus suffered and died, but he came back to life forever! That is what God does! He brings good out of bad. As Christians we, too, may have to suffer but we are also guaranteed eternal resurrection and life.

Next, Peter’s mind and words in verses 19 and 20 seem to wander in directions that are hard to understand. Let me give you a quote from Martin Luther who said, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty what Peter means.” So, neither Martin Luther nor I can adequately explain these words. Here is what it says. See what you think:

*. . . through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the arks were being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water. . . .*

Some Bible students think Jesus descended into hell between his death and resurrection and preached the Gospel giving a second chance to those who died around the time of Noah. That is a pretty big stretch and not supported by the rest of the Bible. Some think that Jesus went to tell fallen rebellious angels that he had won the final victory over Satan. Whatever this obscure statement means, it has a bigger message. Jesus who died came back to life and did good things. The point is simple and clear that Christians who suffer like Jesus can and will end up doing good like Jesus. Good can and will come out of difficulty.

Peter then does what we all do. One thing reminds him of another. Since he mentioned Noah and thought about water that reminded him of baptism so he wrote about what he was thinking in I Peter 3:20-22:

*In it (the ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*

We really need to pay attention to understand this. Peter is teaching with opposites. As water was connected to drowning in Noah’s flood, water is connected to the opposite—saving—in Jesus. As Christians, when we think of baptism, we do not think of drowning; we think of salvation. It is just the opposite. Baptism is putting people into water. It demonstrates the story of what Jesus did: Jesus died, was buried and rose again from the dead.

It sounds like Peter is saying that baptism saves people from sin and hell: “. . . *this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.*” If that were true, we should baptize everyone whether they like it or not and then they are saved from sin and going to heaven.

Let’s try this example: A man is suffering from a heart attack or a stroke. He dials 911 and an ambulance is on the way. While he is waiting he grabs a bottle of aspirin and swallows a few. The ambulance driver says that probably saved his life. After that he carries around a picture of a bottle of aspirin and tells everyone, “This saved my life.” You know what he means—not that the picture saved his life but that the aspirin in the picture saved his life.

It is the same with baptism. Baptism does not save us from sin. It is a picture of Jesus who saves us from sin. Just to make sure we don’t misunderstand, Peter makes it clear. He says, “*It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*”

Please don’t get so caught up in the details that you miss the main point because there is powerful truth here. Christians do suffer. Get ready—ready with what you think and what you do. Take heart. Have hope. You can take it. You can be like Jesus and come out faithful through suffering and fabulously blessed on the other side!

Our Father, this isn’t just theory—this is what we live with. There are some of us who are suffering. There are those who are living out what is here described in your Word. For others of us that opportunity may arise in the future. Give us special grace to understand what is written in your Word and, through Jesus Christ, may we be able to endure suffering and have the victory that you guarantee through your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.

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