

Persevering under Pressure

1 Peter 4:1-19

1. Introduction

When someone becomes a Christian from a Western background today, she may encounter a fair bit of hostility from other people. As she draws back from some of her former activities and tries to live in a way that pleases God, her family and friends may criticise and mock her; a few may even want nothing more to do with her. By reacting in this way they may hope to pressure her into abandoning her new faith.

This pressure can be very unpleasant and upsetting, but someone who converts from Islam usually suffers much more serious persecution. Having left behind his Islamic beliefs and practices he not only has to put up with criticism and mockery; he is also seen as a harmful influence within his family and community. He may well have to face threats, vandalism and violence, and in some places he will live in fear of his life. One purpose of this ill-treatment is to push him into giving up Christianity and returning to Islam.

Nissar Hussein is a hospital nurse in Bradford. Born a Muslim, he and his wife converted to Christianity. They and their children have been jostled, abused, attacked, told loudly to move out of the area and given death threats in the street. His wife was held hostage inside their home by a mob. Their property has been daubed in graffiti and their car rammed and torched. Bricks have been thrown through their windows and the steps to their home strewn with rubbish. Nissar was told that his house would be burnt down if he did not repent and return to

Islam. This all happened in the UK, so imagine how much worse life can be for a convert in a Muslim-majority country, who may also face legal penalties or even execution.

In the face of such suffering new Christians can start to question the value of their faith. Is it really worth accepting persecution for Christianity, or would they do better to discard it, or at least to compromise with other people's expectations of them?

2. A letter for persecuted Christians

The first letter of Peter is written mainly to Christian converts from paganism. They have given up their previous beliefs and practices, including their former involvement in pagan religious festivals, and they are trying to do what is right and good before God. But as a result they are under extreme pressure from their pagan neighbours.

The Christians are no longer respected by their fellow citizens. They are now seen as outsiders who are threatening the unity of their local communities. They suffer ridicule and slander and are accused of crimes against society. The purpose of this persecution is to bully them into rejecting their faith and accepting their old ways once again, and the temptation for them to do so is very strong.

1 Peter is addressed to these problems. It is written to show the readers how valuable their faith really is, and on that basis to encourage them to maintain their new and distinctive Christian lifestyle. The fourth chapter is part of an extended

exhortation on these themes. By reflecting on this we can learn how to encourage converts as they face pressure to abandon their faith – both those in our midst and those in the persecuted churches all over the world.

3. Breaking with the past (4:1-6)

a. Following Christ's example

In the first part of the chapter the readers are urged to take the same attitude to their suffering as Christ did to His. Because He chose to suffer rather than fall into sin, they must do so too. From now on they must obey God's will and accept the hostility that results, not yield again to their sinful human desires and relapse into their former way of life. They have spent enough time in the past following the pagan agenda; they must now live out day by day the decisive break with their past life that they made when they became Christians.

All converts to Christianity have to reject parts of their previous lifestyle that their community takes for granted. Converts from Islam, for instance, must stop reciting the Islamic creed and ritual prayers. They know that their decision may well arouse aggressive opposition from some Muslims. But to sustain them in their resolve they have the example of Christ, who was ready to suffer rather than disobey God's will.

b. Taking the long view

The letter acknowledges that the Christians' acquaintances are surprised that they do not join in pagan celebrations, and slander them for keeping away. But these people will give an account to the one who is ready at any time to judge the living and the dead. Even if the Christians suffer to the point of death, they will still be vindicated when the Spirit raises them to new life.



The Christians to whom 1 Peter was written lived in various parts of what is now northern Turkey, including Cappadocia.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

This kind of long view helps to give converts the right perspective on their sufferings for Christ. For example, think of Abdul Rahman, a native of Afghanistan who converted to Christianity while living abroad. After he went back home he was divorced by his wife, and in the custody battle over their two daughters she and her family denounced him to the police. He was arrested, charged with apostasy and threatened with execution. Although he was later freed due to pressure from the West, he had to leave the country and live in exile.

Converts like Abdul Rahman, who are cruelly ill-treated by their family and former friends and deprived of so much that is dear to them, need to be assured that their persecutors will not have the last word. Instead they will be called to account by God for what they have done to His people, while those they have persecuted will be justified and blessed. So even for believers who are severely afflicted, the value of their faith is far

greater than its cost – a truth to which many persecuted Christians bear passionate witness.

4. Helping one another (4:7-11)

The letter warns that the last days have begun. So the Christians are to be alert and sober for prayer. Above all, they are to show constant love towards one another, because love forgives many sins and limits their destructive effects. They are to be hospitable to one another without grumbling, and to use the gifts that each has received from God to serve one another, so that

God may be glorified through Christ. In the midst of persecution their dedication to God and their commitment to one another will keep them united and faithful, and ready for the end when it comes.

Converts who suffer for their faith in Christ are helped to endure through both the prayers and the mutual support of their Christian family. This includes their local churches, some of which may contain other converts from their former religion. For instance, among other Muslim-background believers who have left the mosque behind, Christian converts from Islam can find a sympathetic and supportive community and renew their courage in the face of persecution.

But the wider Christian community also has a responsibility to suffering converts. For any who live among us we can bring

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their specific concerns before the Lord and offer them love, hospitality, care and ministry directly. For those living further afield we can pray more generally and help to meet their practical needs by using our gifts and resources in their service.

5. Facing hostility (4:12-19)

a. Rejoicing in the flames

According to 1 Peter it is not surprising that the new Christians are having their faith tested by the fires of persecution, and they should not react as though it is. They are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and therefore they should rejoice, so that when His glory is revealed they may be glad. The joy that they have in suffering with Christ will be perfected in the future, when Christians will rejoice with Him in glory.

We must be sensitive in applying these verses. It is obviously not right for comfortable Western Christians, under little pressure for their faith, to lecture persecuted converts in Muslim countries on the need to rejoice! But we can at least hold the promise of eternal joy before our suffering brothers and sisters as an encouragement to them to be glad in the present.

Often, though, the lesson is taught the other way round. Christians suffering hideous mistreatment can be models of joy in the midst of affliction, and so prompt those who suffer much less severely to rejoice too. Believers in South Sudan, who were living in unbelievable deprivation and distress inflicted by the Islamic government in the North, were once asked why they sang so joyfully. They replied, "Because God has given us another day, and because we are going to heaven."

The letter also tells its readers that being abused because they bear the Name of Christ is a sign of God's blessing; it shows that His Spirit rests upon them. Of course they should not attract punishment by sinning; that sort of suffering is no use at all! But they should not be ashamed to suffer as Christians, and if they do, they should praise God because they are called by that Name. Converts facing persecution for their new faith can hardly praise God for their suffering, but like the Sudanese believers,

they can praise Him in it, because it is a sign of His Spirit's presence. They share something of God's glory, even now!

b. Trusting God and doing good

But in the trials of the churches God's final judgment has already been set in motion. Christians are saved through it only by sticking to righteousness and not trying to make things easier for themselves by yielding to their persecutors' demands. This may be hard for them, but the fate of the ungodly and sinners who disobey the gospel will be far worse. So those who suffer for Christ are to entrust themselves to their faithful Creator and do good.

1 Peter does not minimise the suffering that Christian converts have to endure. Persecution is a deeply painful ordeal. Martha Samuel, an Egyptian convert from Islam, was arrested at Cairo airport last year as she tried to leave the country with her family to start a new life. She was stripped and kicked in front of her two young sons, and then beaten and raped while in custody. Her four-year-old, asked if he would like to pray for her, said, "Daddy Jesus, may you forgive the bad guys who are striking Mum and Dad ... make them your children so that they will not strike Mum and Dad again." This is only one of countless heart-wrenching stories that are told every year by the persecuted churches.

And yet – as persecuted Christians will often be the first to say – even at such a great cost it is still good for them to persist in their Christian living. Why? Because the alternative – the judgment that will fall on those who disobey God – is much more serious. And Christians have a faithful God! He made them, and they can commit themselves to Him in the confidence that He will bring them through all their trials to share in His glory.

6. Conclusion

1 Peter 4 makes big demands on converts to Christianity. They are to leave behind their former life and accept the persecution that follows. They are to help one another through prayer and mutual

support. They are to rejoice and praise God in the midst of their suffering, to trust Him, and to keep on doing good. These demands are hard enough for those of us who have to face only a little trouble for the sake of Christ. We should never underestimate how hard they are for converts who suffer grievously at others' hands.

But the passage also offers several reasons for maintaining a Christian lifestyle. The example of Christ, who chose to obey God and suffer the consequences, encourages Christians to do the same. Their persecutors will be called to account by God, while they themselves will be vindicated. Converts are promised eternal joy when Christ's glory is revealed, and they share in that glory even now through the Spirit of God who lives in them. If they persist in doing good they will escape God's judgment on ungodly sinners.

The prayers and support that Christians offer to persecuted converts, through organisations such as Barnabas Fund, can help to remind them of these truths and sustain them in their Christian living. These verses encourage us to be good stewards of the grace of God that we have received, to empower converts who suffer for Christ to stand firm in their fiery ordeal.

A PowerPoint presentation to accompany this sermon is available to download from www.barnabasfund.org/scs, and also on a free DVD, which you can order from your nearest Barnabas office.

Further reading

For further exposition of this chapter and its principal themes, please see the following:

Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York, Doubleday, 1997, pp705-724

J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary), Waco, Word Books, 1988, pp223-275