

1 Peter 4:1-6

1Pe 4:1 (NKJV) **Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,² that he no longer should live the rest of *his* time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.³ For we *have spent* enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles--when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.⁴ In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with *them* in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of *you*.⁵ They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.⁶ For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.**

V3 very vividly tells us that all believers used to live in sin, but that that old lifestyle is no longer something for which they now live. In my mind, this section of Scripture (v1-6) is a great picture and reality check regarding what the Christian life is really all about. In reality, Peter's audience was willing to endure scorn, ridicule, contempt, and sarcasm for their personal faith in Christ. If I can say it this way, it actually became a badge of honor for them. They were not afraid to suffer for their faith, but were more than willing to endure whatever God may have allowed to afflict them.

In v4, Peter says that sin had so infected the lost people that they actually thought it strange, they were surprised and astonished that the believers were not willing to be engaged in the same levels of debauchery and wild living that they were. In the Greek text, the sentence simply ends with the word "**blaspheming**". I.e., they were constantly speaking evil of and verbally maligning the Christians for the fact that they exercised a kind of godly restraint from living the way the pagans were living. It is important to appreciate that at this point in the life of the church that unbelievers in other parts of the Roman empire lived a very sinful life. It was just a normal part of the Roman-Greco culture. Idolatry was just a normal part of their daily living and was spiritually woven into the entire fabric of the existing culture. It did not matter if it was life in the home, life at social occasions, or life at their pagan religious festivals. Life was simply going from one debauchery to another debauchery. That was why it was so exhilarating for the people to go to the arenas to watch Christians being burned alive, torn apart and eaten by wild animals, or pulled apart by horses. They enjoyed it. There was emperor worship, and if someone did not participate in certain events, then they became social outcasts. What all of this meant for the committed Christian in that cultural environment was that they were socially and physically abused and they were discriminated against for their faith. One writer said that often "*sharp words turn into sharp swords*".¹

The problem is that for many Christians today, they are doing everything they can to avoid any and all conflict. If they have to, they will do whatever is needed to find a way around the pressure to be godly. They will ignore opportunities to honor Christ and they will disregard the conviction that the Holy Spirit seems to always be creating in their life to keep themselves separate from sin in their life. The culture with all of its sinful "options" and allurements just seems to swallow people up spiritually. The result of these kinds of decisions is that that believer will ultimately succeed in that effort and become what we addressed in the first part of v1 as becoming spiritually "neutralized". They eventually just become

¹ Schreiner, 204.

numb and totally unresponsive to what God really wants for their life. Spiritually this is a dangerous place to find ourselves and I personally do not know how to quantify the spiritual consequences.

So, we come to v5 and v6. V5 is obviously a reality check for the unbeliever in that they seem to forget that at some point in time that they will give an account to God for how they have lived and in how they demeaned both God the Father and Jesus Christ. The phrase in v5 of “**give an account**” is a courtroom term and in this context is a reference to the final judgment of the unbeliever. Everyone’s life, whether they believe or accept it or not, is leading them to a particular destination, to a specific eternal destiny. There is a specific day in the future when all of the lost will be judged by God. [Acts 17:30-31](#) says,

Ac 17:30 (NKJV) Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

For the person who is lost, no matter what they think about God, about eternity, or salvation, their life will end in a final judgment. No one gets a vote on this. Eternity and God’s judgment of the lost is not a part of the democratic process, but is simply a spiritual reality that will always triumph over the individual’s life. Listen to just one passage in [2 Thessalonians 1:6-9](#) where Paul describes the severity of what the reviling unbeliever will ultimately face at their death.

2Th 1:6 (NKJV) since *it is* a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, ⁷ and to *give* you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, ⁸ in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

The ultimate picture of God’s final judgement for the unbeliever is found in [Revelation 20:11-5](#) which says,

Rev 20:11 (NKJV) Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Now, that brings us to v6 which says,

1Pe 4:6 (NKJV) For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

The first question we have to ask is simple – “for what reason” was the gospel preached to those who are dead, and specifically what does the word “**dead**” mean in this passage and to whom is it referring? The obvious reason that the gospel has to be preached is because everyone is going to stand before God one day, and accepting the gospel is the only thing that can genuinely save someone from God’s eternal

judgment. Now, for whatever reason, many theologians believe that this is one of the most difficult verses in the Bible to interpret. There are as many as 20 different interpretations of this verse. However, right at the outset of looking at this verse, it should be perfectly clear that for the lost person who dies that there will never be any second chances in eternity for salvation – which is exactly how some have actually interpreted this verse. A person cannot deny the faith and deny Christ now, but then embrace Him after they have died. If that were the actual case, then because of the flesh and its lusts and desires, virtually no one would ever choose to follow Christ in this life simply because they knew that they would be given another chance for salvation after they died. Contrary to what some teach, there is no universal redemption, there is no second chance for the lost person, there is no spiritual reprieve for the lost after death.²

It seems, however, that one of the interpretive issues that create all of these various interpretations is that the verse is somehow removed out of its context, and that context is clearly the “suffering” that believers will often face. This is the greatest chapter on suffering in the Bible, so this verse must be interpreted within that context. We cannot lose sight of the context. Obviously, and this is certainly the key to coming to the correct interpretation, when [1 Peter](#) talks about suffering, it is **always** speaking of believers who suffer or suffered because of their faith in Christ. So, v6 should be seen as a direct reference to believers who had the gospel preached to them, believed the gospel, but then they died. The actual Greek word for “**dead**” in this verse specifically means those who are physically dead. It does **NOT** refer to unbelievers who are spiritually dead. Many people who take the position that the word “**dead**” is speaking of those who are spiritually dead link this verse back to [1 Peter 3:19](#) which says,

1Pe 3:19 (NKJV) by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,

Their contention is that Jesus went and preached the gospel to the lost in Hades, but as we saw in the study of that verse the word for “**preached**” was not the Greek word for preaching the gospel, but the New Testament term for making a proclamation. Jesus declared to them that He had defeated both death and sin and that He was the Victor over Satan and all demonic powers. There is not one single place where the New Testament even alludes to the fact that a lost person can be redeemed after death. After a lost person dies, there are no more opportunities for repentance or salvation.

There were people that Peter’s readers knew who had both heard and believed the gospel, but had died before he had written this letter. Many of them died as martyrs. I.e., they were “**judged according to men in the flesh**”, or physically put to death, martyred. However, after their death they were now alive to God in the spiritual realm. Peter’s entire argument here is that even in death that the believer will triumph.³ The point is that once a lost person has died, there will not be any more preaching of the gospel to them. So, this verse is not talking about the gospel being preached to those in Hades. It would actually be meaningless to do so. Just the fact that they are in a place of divine judgement is evidence to them that they completely ignored God and are now irreversibly suffering the indescribable and eternal consequences of unbelief. They heard the gospel, but rejected it, and now they are experiencing the dreadful consequences of that unbelief.

² Schreiner, 207-208.

³ MacArthur, 231.

It should at least be mentioned that during this particular time in the development of the church that there were still questions regarding what happened to some of the believers when they died. In [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#), Paul seemed to address their concerns in this passage by speaking about the rapture of the church and of the believers.

1Th 4:13 (NKJV) But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The spiritual reality that is created in suffering for someone who is truly committed to Christ is that any suffering that they may experience for their faith has a perfecting power on their life. It actually increases their spiritual strength, allows them to experience measures of God's grace that they may never have previously experienced, drives them to a deeper level of spiritual awareness, drives them to prayer, and increases their rewards. Paul aptly expressed some of this in [2 Corinthians 4:16-18](#) when he said,⁴

2Co 4:16 (NKJV) Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

The correct interpretation of v6 should be somewhat clear. It is referring to believers who have died, with some who may have been martyred. Because they are believers, the latter part of the verse simply states that they will “**live according to God in the spirit**”, or live in the spiritual realm with God. Much of this truth and reality were provided to us in [1 Peter 1:6-9](#) which said,

1Pe 1:6 (NKJV) In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, ⁸ whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ receiving the end of your faith--the salvation of your souls.

These believers had already experienced a great heaviness and distress because of their faith in Christ. In fact all through this letter up to this point, the believers had been encouraged to endure suffering. For instance, [1 Peter 2:18-21](#) speaks of some of the household servants suffering.

1Pe 2:18 (NKJV) Servants, *be* submissive to *your* masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ¹⁹ For this *is* commendable, if because of conscience toward God

⁴ MacArthur, 232.

one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ For what credit *is it* if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this *is* commendable before God. ²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

Then in [1 Peter 3:8-9](#) it says,

1Pe 3:8 (NKJV) Finally, all *of you be* of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, *be* tenderhearted, *be* courteous; ⁹ not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.

[1 Peter 4:1-2](#) said,

1Pe 4:1 (NKJV) Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² that he no longer should live the rest of *his* time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

If we are ever going to be victorious in this area of our life, then we must be armed with the mind of Christ. Obviously, a lost person sees absolutely no benefit or advantage in death. However, the problem for the lost person is that they simply do not see the whole picture. Even though a believer seems to gain no advantage in dying for their faith, from God's perspective it has great meaning and eternal blessing for the believer. Physical death is never the end, but simply the beginning of life spent either with God or without God. Death will never allow a lost person to escape God's judgment, but to the contrary it actually brings them immediately into it. The gospel was never intended to save someone from physical death, but rather to save them from eternal judgment.

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