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IN BIBLE & THEOLOGY

Christians Living Under a Hostile Government

WITH GUEST LECTURER
DR. MANFRED KOBER

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SESSION 3:

SUFFERING SAINTS IN COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

THE GRACE OF SUFFERING ILLUSTRATED
BY GODLY SAINTS IN EASTERN EUROPE

HOW SAINTS SUBMIT TO SUFFERING
1 PETER 4:12-19

Introduction

Peter writes primarily to gentiles scattered throughout the Roman Empire, encouraging them to be faithful to the Lord in a pagan and hostile society. Their persecution took the form of slander, attacks by local officials and ostracism.

Peter states that theme of 1 Peter in 5:12, “the true grace of God” in the life of the believer. Charles Ryrie, in his *Study Bible*, observes that grace means

1. Security, 1:3-12
2. Sobriety, 1:13-2:10
3. Submission, 2:11-3:12
4. **Suffering, 3:13-4:19**
5. Service, 5:1-18

In 4:12-19 we find reasons why suffering is to be a joyful experience for believers.

1A. Suffering is Commonplace 12

Suffering is not something to be regarded foreign to the believer’s experience, rather, it is a refining test. While Christians in the United States have never really suffered, suffering has been a common experience for believers worldwide down through the ages. In that respect, **the United States is an interlude in history and an island in geography.**

It is fitting to cite below illustrations of Christians in Communist Eastern Europe who rejoiced because they were privileged to suffer for Christ. We dare not forget their heroic stand for the Lord. They serve as a splendid illustration to us of how believers respond amid persecution.

2A. Suffering Will Be Compensated 13

1b. Exposition:

The believers is to rejoice under suffering now because of the “exceeding joy” he will experience when he is someday in the presence of Christ.

2b. Example:

Pastor Pavel Nagy in Doksy, the Czech Republic

The European summer of 1986 was unusually hot. My family and I had returned from our visit to East Germany where we had taken Christian literature. They accompanied me on this ministry every other year. We then made a separate trip into Czechoslovakia to visit the Bartos family whom I had known since 1963. They live about an hour’s drive northeast of Prague, in the picturesque town of Roudnice nad Labem, on the Elbe River. Karel has been a faithful pastor for many years in the Evangelical Brethren Church which traces its spiritual roots back to the Reformer Jan Hus.

Because of the scorching temperatures, Karel decided that we might wish to take a day off from visiting shut-ins and friends and drive to a nearby lake for a day of cool enjoyment. Their two children, Kaja and Daniela are about the age of our Christa and Eric, and we were sure we would enjoy a day of rest from our usual ministry.

Suddenly Karel became concerned. Where would we park the car? If we went to the water for some time, chances are when we returned to the car, it would be stripped of its windshield wipers, tires and battery—a rather common occurrence in that country at that time. Then Karel remembered that in the lakeside town of Doksy, about an hour's drive to the northeast, there was a church of his denomination where we might be able to park our car. He called up the pastor there who immediately agreed that we could leave the car at the parsonage, located a short walk from the lake.

As we set out on our adventure, I was asked to drive again. My friends insisted that I had lots more driving experience than they.

Apparently Pastor Pavel Nagy was looking for us, because as we approached the parsonage, the large cast-iron gates swung open and he motioned us to drive around the back of the house, away from the prying eyes of the neighbors across the street, who were most likely informers for the Communist government. They would customarily copy down every license number of every car that stopped at the church.

We were introduced to Pastor Nagy and his wife, a very pleasant couple near retirement age. They are both of Hungarian extraction, thus the name Nagy. Our friend Karel handed them a large bag of various Christian literature items, part of the sizable amount of Czech literature which we had brought in by train from Nuremberg just a few days before.

We four adults and four children enjoyed the cool water of the lake. We swam around in the water and then rented a boat for about an hour. After that, we returned to the parsonage where a most happy Brother Nagy met us at the door. Both pastors became involved in a very animated discussion in the Czech language. I finally slowed them down. They both are fluent in German. I said, "Would you please explain to me what you are so happy about?" My pastor friend from Roudnice said, "They are gone! They are gone!" I said, "What is gone?" He said, "All the literature!" I said, "The booklets and tracts and books we brought along?" "Yes!" Then Pastor Nagy said, "See the grocery store diagonally across the street? While you were gone, a truck pulled up to deliver something. We never know what is being delivered, but we always get in line. There's a long line that forms before we know what's being sold. If we don't need it, our uncle or cousin will. I saw that as a sign from the Lord. You had just given me all these good gospel books and booklets in our language. I felt that I should go across the street and share them with the people. So I got in line with my bag. Then I went up to the front of the line, putting a gospel tract into every bag." You always bring your own bag, at least you used to, in the days of Communist rule.

And then he said, "I turned around and the line was forming in back of me. I gave each individual standing in line a gospel tract and the amazing thing is, nobody rejected it!" "But," I said, "this is a Communist country. Some of the townspeople are undoubtedly informers. I'm sure in the line of people there were individuals who were going to inform on you. They get brownie points from the government, so they are going to tell on you for what you've done." Brother Nagy's response, "So?" Brother Nagy was about 70 years old at that time. His response

was, “I have served,” (and this is where the suffering from 1 Peter 4 fits in) “I have served the Lord in a Communist society for all these years, and how many years do you think I have left? And even if something happens to me, don’t you think the Lord will make it worth my while? I am so delighted I had those literature items to share with them.”

As it turned out, providentially he was not turned in to the authorities. He took a stand. Everyone took a gospel tract. Who knows whether these people ever had an item of gospel literature in their hands?

We were ready to drive back to Roudnice, but because we were thirsty, we were invited upstairs to our friends’ very rustic apartment. We could tell these were extremely poor people but very much satisfied in the Lord.

We drank some milk in their humble kitchen, since it was not advisable to drink their town water. Before we left, Pastor Nagy gave me a piece of rock with a Scripture verse painted on it. He pointed through his kitchen window up to a hill about eight miles away, crowned by an imposing fortress, the Bezdez Castle. He said, “I’ve climbed up to that castle and brought that rock back. You take it to America as a reminder that our God is as solid as that rock on which that castle’s built. You can depend on Him for life and for eternity.”

I’ve visited these dear folks many times since. As far as I know, nobody from the Western world has ever been to their humble home. Thus it is very special for them to have visitors from America. Normally when I come, they all gather together, even if it is during the week. There is the pastor and his wife. His son is a judge in a family court; one of his daughters is a concert pianist and the other daughter is a nurse in a hospital for mentally challenged people. The judge throws a couple of cases out of court so he can come. The concert pianist cancels practice, and the nurse gives the patients some sedatives, so we can meet. All this so they can have a few hours of fellowship with their friend from the United States.

3A. Suffering is Commendable 14

1b. Exposition:

Peter relates suffering to a beatitude:

“happy are you,” 3:14 – don’t be afraid or troubled

“happy are you,” 4:14 – because you will receive special grace

Suffering saints often radiate outwardly the evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was said to have “the face of an angel” (Acts 16:15).

2b. Example:

Gudrun Pfeiffer and her parents in Jägerswald near Werda, East Germany.

Just to the north of the Czech Republic lies my home country, Germany. One of the largest provinces is Saxony. The Vogtland is my home county. You may be familiar with the largest cities in Saxony such as Dresden, or perhaps Leipzig and Zwickau. I was born in Zwickau. The Vogtland is a lovely mountainous area in a corner of southwestern East Germany, bordered by Bavaria and the Czech Republic. All during the Iron Curtain years we were never more than 40 miles from West Germany; but of course, we could never get there. Falkenstein is my home town. Nearby is Werda. On Sunday afternoon my grandfather used to walk

with my mother and us three children to a church service where he was the exhorter. My family were very conservative Methodists. We became well acquainted with the folks in these little outlying congregations. My grandfather had a close friend in the church in Werda who lived in a remote spot in the forest called Jägerswald (Hunter's Forest). He and his family lived in a house built 450 years ago by a forest ranger. Walter Pfeiffer, his wife Klärle and their daughter Gudrun called this quaint place their home for many years.

In 1 Peter 4:14, we are told if we are reproached for the name of Christ, we are happy, and there would be an aura of glory upon us. Many people have observed that when you meet people from Eastern Europe, no matter who, if they are believers and have suffered for the sake of Christ, they often radiate outwardly the evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This has been especially true of the Pfeiffer family.

On my Reformation Tour, one reason people so enjoyed meeting my relatives and friends in East Germany is because there is something special about them. They have suffered for their faith, and you can tell that by looking at their radiant faces.

I visited the godly Pfeiffer family many times in their humble home. Their daughter Gudrun is now along in years. The entryway to the ancient home is so low, I never could enter the home erect. People must have been shorter 400 years ago. I asked my friends there repeatedly to remove the cross beam above the door so I could walk in straight but they have never yet listened. When you visit there, you never leave unless a) you have been served some coffee b) Gudrun sits at the pump organ and you sing some Christian songs and c) you enjoy some of the home-baked pound cake. One finds an aura of fellowship and blessing in that home that is difficult to find elsewhere. Occasionally we've had American friends join us for our ministry in East Germany. We always try take them out into the forest to the remote cottage of Jägerswald. One special visit there with my family in 1969 stands out. As we entered the living room, Gudrun said, "Manfred, you and your family sit down. I have a story to tell to you."

We settled back on the ancient couch and listened to her remarkable account. She said, "You know last year the Communist troops invaded the Czech Republic. The Czech leader, Alexander Dubcek had tried to ease the yoke of Russian oppression in what was called 'The Prague Spring.' In response, the Kremlin took drastic action. Thousands of Russian and East German troops were stationed around the forest just north of the Czech border. The Russians then went into the Czech Republic but the East Germans were not allowed to go there. But they were stationed here between our home and the next town, about a 40-minute walk away. I really didn't know what to do. I have to work in town, in Werda." (She walks 40 minutes through the forest to get to her place of work and 40 minutes back.) "And we prayed about it, and my parents and I said, the Lord will protect me."

Then Gudrun continued her riveting narrative. In the morning she walked her usual way to work and she noticed German troops from the Volksarmee, about 1,000 soldiers, camped in the forest. At the end of the day, she came back through the forest. It was getting dark. Suddenly somebody tapped her on the shoulder.

She was startled by the soldier emerging from behind a tree. He politely asked her, “Do you go to work there every day?” She said, “Yes I do.” He said, “Would you do us soldiers a favor? We have no communication with our loved ones back home. Our wives and sweethearts have no idea whether we are fighting and dying in the Czech Republic. They have no idea where we are. Would you take some letters from us to mail in town tomorrow, thus giving our loved ones information that we are just fine?” Gudrun promised that she would and for a number of weeks she became an angel of mercy to them. The relatives of the soldiers wrote in care of her mailbox in town and she brought mail back at the end of the day. The scheme worked flawlessly.

She and her parents knew that this situation was brought about by the Lord in order that they might have an opportunity to witness to these soldiers. And what they did, interestingly, was to invite these soldiers into their home. Over a period of six weeks, they had 600 soldiers in their house. The Pfeiffers kept the bath water hot by heating the water tank with wood or soft coal briquettes. The soldiers were invited in, one after another, to take a hot, refreshing bath. They were invited into the living room, where they had a cup of coffee with some pound cake. Coffee in those days cost the equivalent of \$5.90 a cup, or \$65 a pound, thus this was a very special treat.) Then they sang some songs with them and gave them their testimony. As a result of these soldiers coming to their house, a good number of them were saved.

As Gudrun related her story, she brought out a stack of mail that had accumulated during the past year after the events happened. These soldiers had written thank you notes back to that humble family, expressing their appreciation that somebody was willing to tell them that not Communism but Christ was able to answer their basic needs and gave them a peace that they had never known.

As these former soldiers got married, they sent their wedding pictures. As they were blessed with children, the Pfeiffers, of course, would get baby pictures. It was just wonderful to see how the Lord used that one family in a 450-year-old house, way out in the forest, to witness to over 600 soldiers. And they kept up the contact for years. You see, unbeknownst to anyone except my brother and my family, much of the Christian literature we took over there ended up with Gudrun. She mailed the encouraging literature to these former soldiers. They would keep the book for about three weeks. Then these soldiers would return the item and soon would receive another book. So Gudrun became, in effect, the local lending library, way out in the forest. Amazingly, but not surprisingly, none of contacts ever turned the Pfeiffers over to the Stasi, the dreaded secret police.

As you might gather, there is something special about these people, people. Gudrun and her parents were dedicated believers, ready to witness whenever they had an opportunity. One could just tell that they were willing to suffer for the Lord and God the Holy Spirit gave them a special aura of glory, as Peter predicted.

Walter and Klärle are enjoying the presence of their Lord. Gudrun, now in her late 80's, still resides at that special place called Jägerswald.

4A. **Suffering is Christ-like** 15-16

1b. Exposition:

Much suffering is the result of punishment for misdeeds. Peter lists four sins that believers are capable of committing. It seems that each sin mentioned actually represents a category:

Murderer — violation of the sanctity of life

Thief – violation of property

Evil Doer – violation of harmony

Meddler – violation of privacy

The term “busybody in other men’s matters” is the translation of the Greek *allotriepiskopos*, a word which may have been coined by the Apostle Peter. If believers suffer, they should do so not as criminals but as Christians, not as evil doers but as earnestly dedicated to Christ.

2b. Example:

Examples abound of believers under Communism who suffered for being believers, sometimes glorifying God through martyrdom.

Frieda Schnabel, my great aunt, a faithful witness in her senior citizen home and thus persecuted.

In our text, Peter says—if you suffer, suffer as a Christian. This is only one out of three times the word “Christian” is used in the Bible: in Acts 26:28, “almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian”; in Acts 11:26, they were first called Christians in Antioch; and here in 1 Peter 4:15-16. A Christian is simply one who follows Christ. Peter’s inspired injunction is, “Let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on his behalf.”

My father never returned from the war. When my mother passed away, my brother and sister were adopted by fine Christian people. Before I came to America, I lived with my godly grandfather. **Frieda Schnabel**, our great aunt, lived just half a block around the corner. Even when my brother and sister still were home, my great aunt would invite me over to her third-floor apartment. She would wrap me up in a blanket on the couch, especially when the weather got cold. Then she would take her copper hot water bottle and put it at my feet. Then she began to “torture” me, by sitting there and quoting almost endlessly, poems she had learned in her childhood. They were good Christian poems, such as *Der Sieg der Liebe* (The Victory of Love). She also recited long passages of Scripture. After enduring the recitations for about thirty minutes, I suddenly remembered that my grandfather wanted me back at our place to make kindling wood for the fire for the next day. But this lady had an incredible memory and she memorized much in her childhood. And what she memorized in her childhood, God used in her old age to be a witness.

What happened was this: Once I had left for the United States, and Tante Frieda had gotten along in years, and she was put in an old folks’ home in the nearby town of Wernesgrün, named for a famous beer, Wernesgrüner Pilsner (though I never touch the beverage). The town lies about 10 miles from where we lived. But

for my great aunt it might as well have been in another world. Tante Frieda was placed in the senior citizen home, which was a stately old mansion confiscated by the Communists from a rich industrialist family in town.

I had gone to the United States in 1953. When I came back to Germany after not being home for ten years, I studied at the University of Erlangen in West Germany and began to visit relatives and friends in East Germany. Tante Frieda was one of the main persons I wanted to see because she always had been so kind to me. I visited her during my first visit. On my second trip back home, I was ready to see her again. I went to our church on Sunday. Our second cousin, Johannes Schnabel, was the pastor in my home church of Falkenstein. I mentioned to him after the service, as we shook hands at the door, "I'm going to see Tante Frieda on Wednesday." His response, "I wish you had come a few days earlier." I said, "Why?" He said, "Haven't you heard? Tante Frieda died four days ago." I said, "How can that be?! She seemed to be in robust health. Her heart was as strong as could be." He said, "Why don't you wait until all the people are gone. I'll talk to you privately." He continued shaking hands with the parishioners as he said goodbye to them.

Then he took me aside. He said, "Look, Frieda had a strong physical body, but her mind was going. They put her on the fourth floor of that building, knowing she couldn't walk down the stairs, so she was limited to one floor. What Frieda did was this: when she felt well enough, she would go from room to room to visit folks. She recited passages of Scripture and quoted Christian poetry. She asked each person she encountered, with a deep, entreating voice, (and I remember her saying it to me, too) '*Liebst Du meinen Jesus?*' (Do you love my Jesus?) Most of the old folks in that quite dreadful place never had anyone come to visit them. They just loved Tante Frieda and appreciated her visits. But the doctors and nurses were convinced and callous Communists. They hated what she did. That's why they consigned her up there. It was a smelly place. I won't even attempt to describe the odor once you got up there. But Tante Frieda, while her mind was failing, could recite Scripture and quote poetry. She was a real blessing to those folks who shared that upstairs floor with her."

Then Johannes continued, "You know how she was hated by the personnel in that senior citizen home. I visited her last Wednesday. She was as healthy as could be. The next day, she was dead. I can't prove it, but you know the situation in our country. I dare say one of the nurses gave her an injection that caused her death. I cannot prove that this is the case, but that would be the most likely scenario."

Tante Frieda died because of her love for the Lord. She apparently died a martyr's death. Why? Because she suffered as a Christian. Right now she is enjoying the presence of the Lord in glory, knowing that someday the Lord will compensate her at the judgment seat of Christ.

5A. Suffering is Conditioning 17-18

The believer's suffering is not retributive but refining. His judgment is not a punishment but a purging. Peter contrasts the discipline of disciples with the doom of the disobedient sinner. The chastisement of

believers should prompt **gratitude**; their suffering results in **glory**, but the judgment of the sinner results in **gloom** and eternal doom. The salvation of saints is not in doubt but sin and Satan make it difficult for them to believe (v. 18). If difficulty besets the salvation of the disciples, disaster characterizes the fate of the disobedient.

6A. **Suffering is Consoling** 19

1b. Exposition:

The believer suffering according to the will of God commits himself to God, much as Christ did on the cross (Lk. 23:46). God is only here called “creator” in the New Testament. He is called the “faithful creator,” a most comforting thought for suffering saints and a wonderful reminder. “Faithful” relates to His love: there is no doubt of His affection and interest. “Creator” relates to His power: there is no doubt of His ability.

2b. Example:

Martha Löscher, my aunt, in Ellefeld, Saxony

Frau Martha Löscher was my mother’s sister. We affectionately called her Tante Marthel. Her life graphically illustrates how humble believers can find comfort and strength in the midst of suffering and persecution.

Whenever I visited East Germany, I would bring for my relatives gospel literature items which they would share with others. While the Communists prohibited the East German believers from sharing their faith with others in public, the Christians there believed that when it came to the sharing of the gospel, they would obey God rather than man, using Peter and the apostles as an example (Acts 5:29).

During my visits I normally would spend the first few days with Tante Marthel and her family, who had taken in my brother as one of their own. Every time as I unpacked my suitcases, Tante Marthel and her daughter Maria each asked to get the majority of the tracts. At times I had to take them back and carefully count out the items so that all the five or six individuals would have an equal amount to distribute.

Much like Pastor Nagy in the Czech Republic, Tante Marthel, whenever she went shopping, would take along literature items to give to the other shoppers, queued up. Her unafraid witness for her Lord almost led to her imprisonment on several occasions.

As mentioned above, on my visits back home I would initially stay with Tante Marthel, her husband Arnold and the children. It must have been around 1985, during my yearly visit, that Tante Marthel related a most recent and interesting incident.

She recounted that just before I arrived she was hospitalized for a minor operation. She shared the hospital room with seven other ladies, typical for health care under Communism. Before she was admitted, Tante Marthel decided that she

would take some Christian literature items with her and try to witness to the other ladies. The literature might well have been some of the sermon booklets by Dr. M. R. DeHaan, translated into the German language. I used to take large quantities with me, made available to me free of charge by our Baptist Mid-Missions missionaries in Bavaria.

After the operation, as she recovered for several days, she would read these booklets. As she expected, one by one the ladies in the room with her, curious what she was reading, asked if they could borrow her reading material. She gladly shared the requested booklets with them. All the ladies except one asked for the materials. My aunt said they were all a little suspicious because this lady in a corner bed kept very much to herself and sometimes when some of the ladies were out of the room, the doctors or nurses would come in and whisper with that withdrawn person. Tante Marthel surmised that perhaps this lady was a government informer. How right she was!

My aunt related that only a day or two after she came home from the hospital, an officer from the dreaded Volkspolizei came to the door and said, “Frau Löscher, we expect to see you at the police headquarters in Auerbach on Thursday at 7 a.m. Then he left without further explanation. No one in the family was in any doubt as to what prompted this disturbing visit. Uncle Arnold assured his wife that he would go with her. She, however, fully trusting in God’s help, told him that he was needed at his place of business. She would go, but would not be alone. Said she, “The Lord Jesus Christ will go with me.”

By bus she arrived at the county police headquarters. She was ushered through a door, then a hallway and yet another door, which led into a large conference room. Three stern-faced officers sat around the massive conference table, but at the end where she was ushered to sit, in semi-circular fashion, the entire assortment of her religious publications which she had shared at the hospital had been recovered. The suspicious lady obviously informed on Tante Marthel and the police went to the various homes of the ladies who had requested the reading material, which they had been invited to take home to their families. The police retrieved every single item.

The interrogation was rather brief. They demanded to know whether these were her items. She said they were. “Where did you get those?” She skillfully and truthfully answered that from time to time friends from Switzerland (a neutral country) mailed her helpful booklets. Also visitors from West Germany and other countries brought Christian booklets with them. Then she noted that in their country, the DDR, the constitution guarantees religious freedom.

They told her that it was true they had religious freedom but citizens were not allowed to force their religious opinions on other people. My aunt told them that since the officers obviously talked to the ladies who were in the hospital room with her, the women would have told them that she did not force those booklets on them. In fact, they are the ones who requested to read the material. Of course, they had to acknowledge that this was true. As the interrogation concluded, they issued a final, ominous threat. “Frau Löscher, no matter what you may think about sharing religious matters with others, if we ever determine that you have tried to

influence others with your religious ideas, it will be problematic for you. We know you have a husband and four children. But one more transgression on your part and we promise to imprison you for five years.”

This is the account from my aunt. She concluded her report with a question, “Manfred, do you have any gospel tracts for me this time?”

My aunt, as many Iron Curtain believers, was willing to face hardships and persecution in her faithful witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. The sterling testimony of believers behind the Iron Curtain amidst persecution, hardships and difficulties should be an example to us. They found the secret of Deuteronomy 33:25, “As your days, so shall your strength be.” These saints took the Savior at His Word, “My strength is sufficient for thee” (2 Cor. 12:9).

For the believer enduring persecution — indeed for every earnest believer — three principles can be inferred from the passage:

- 1. Declare the Savior**, v. 14 exalt “the name of Christ”
- 2. Depend on the Spirit**, v. 14 “the spirit of glory and God resteth upon you”
- 3. Determine to stand**, v. 16 “be not ashamed”

God as faithful creator knows, cares and is able to sustain the believer. Therefore, rejoice in the suffering (13, 14) and glorify the Savior (13, 14, 16).