

“Glorifying God in Fiery Trials”

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 4:12-19, ESV

Is it not great to have a faith which has found a resting place? Our faith is not in a device, a ritual, or a creed, but it is in the person of Jesus the Living Lord. How good it is to celebrate Him.

Suffering as a Christian

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

On January 19, 1981, a group of terrorists called "M-19" broke into a mission's residence in Bogotá, Columbia, and kidnapped Wycliffe translator Chet Bitterman. The communiqué from the terrorists read, “Chet Bitterman will be executed unless the Summer Institute of Linguistics and all its members leave Columbia by 6:00 PM February 19th.” Wycliffe stood their ground. Brenda Bitterman and her two little children waited forty-eight days. On March 7th the terrorists shot Chet Bitterman through the heart and left his body on a bus in Bogota. More than one hundred Wycliffe members in Columbia were given the choice of a new field. None left. Two hundred candidates volunteered to take Chet Bitterman's place.

I remember hearing stories like these in which believers yielded their lives for the cause of Christ as a boy in Sunday school. Interestingly, my thoughts as a child did not question God's goodness in His mysterious ways. Even as a little boy I understood Jesus promised those who follow Him would endure persecution; that was an expectation we ought to have. Instead of these stories causing me to question the depth of my own faith, I found myself asking, “Lord, would I stay faithful underneath similar circumstances and such intense suffering? Would I deny You to gain freedom from pain, or perhaps even freedom to continue to live?” I remember praying then, as a boy, God would give me courage and faith, that if I ever were in such circumstances I would remain faithful to Him all the way to the end.

Some may say, “Oh, Ritch, that is far too grim of a thought for any little boy to endure. It must have been dreadful.” No, I disagree. I think this thought of dying for Jesus Christ is vital to every follower of Jesus, whether one is eight years old eighty years old. It is a thought Jesus demands of us when He tells us to count the cost before we decide to follow Him. Listen to His words in Luke 14,

²⁷ “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus is telling us these are not issues to consider later in the Christian life, but it is an issue to consider in the front of one's commitment to Christ. Dying for Christ is not a far off possibility in this world that hates Him so.

John Piper wisely writes: "I think it is very important for every one of you to think hard about what you would do if cultic terrorists hijacked your plane and before they blew it up offered to let everyone off who would say, 'Jesus Christ is not my Savior and Lord.' The reason I think it is important to think about this is that the resurgence of fundamentalist, anti-Christian violence in the world makes it very possible that it will happen. But more important is the fact that thinking about your own death for Christ will help you live for Christ as you should. A true Christian must be willing to say, 'I will not renounce Christ, even if it costs my life.'"

"But, as soon as we say that," John Piper continues, "it makes a whole lot of things in our lives look ridiculous. 'I will die for you, but I can't find time to sit and read your teaching each day.' 'I will die for you, but prayer doesn't seem real.' 'I will die for you, but I can't talk to Jim about you at work.' 'I will die for you, but I can't support your cause with more than 10% of my income.' One of the best ways to bring wonderful Christ-honoring changes into your life is to measure your way of life by your willingness to die for Jesus." What a great challenge! I love what John Piper writes here; it is ridiculous the many things we get caught up in when we consider our willingness to die for Jesus. Many other commitments seem really small and insignificant in light of that one. And, if you are like me, you will wonder, "Would I have the courage and faith to stand for Jesus, even if it meant my death?"

1 Peter 4:12-19 is for us and it causes us to entertain this very question. Peter encourages us by giving us five exhortations that will help us persevere in our faith even in times of great persecution and testing. Each of these responses will be a command God gives to us in the text and each, I believe, is intended by Peter to help us to move us toward so we might find our great joy in Christ today.

The first God-glorifying response to persecution is: Do not be surprised at your fiery trial,

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Peter begins with the word "beloved". Other translations read, "Dear friends". Peter is not writing from the lofty height of an ivory tower. He is down in the midst of the briars and the thorn bushes with these brothers and sisters. Even as he gives them difficult commands at a difficult time, he himself is enduring the same things they are and he is communicating his tenderness and his love for them. The words he writes to them are hard words, but they are loving, necessary, and good words. He says, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial." He exhorts them not to be astonished, bewildered, perplexed, and despairing.

This word carries the idea of not being surprised to the point of becoming cynical, embittered, disillusioned, and resentful toward Him. That is a temptation for us in a time of suffering. When we do right and suffer for it, does not Satan whisper, "Hey, your God is not so good to you after all, is He? If He loved you, He surely would keep you from the kinds of pain you are enduring. After all, you are honoring Him. You are obeying Him." We are tempted to ask questions in times of trial, questions like, "Where was God when this young missionary in Columbia with two small children was shot through the heart?" Job's wife asks those kinds of questions, but Peter tells us not to ask those kinds of questions. They are unworthy of the Lord who gave His own life to purchase us.

Peter points to two reasons why we must not become resentful or surprise to the point of bitterness toward God. First, God designs our suffering for a good purpose. God knows what He is doing and it is not meaningless or by accident. The purpose of the fiery trial is the testing or proving work of God in purifying our faith, making us like Jesus.

The phrase "fiery trial" is important, but I do not believe it is so much describing the intensity of the sting of pain, although that is surely part of it, so much as it is pointing us to the purpose within the trial. Earlier, in 1 Peter 1, Peter employs the image of fire with regard to trial, and he says,

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The picture is of a goldsmith refining gold. To refine gold the refiner heats it up and the dross, or impurities, rises to the surface. The refiner then scrapes the dross off the top and the gold becomes purer and refined, so much so when the refiner looks into the surface of the gold and sees no scum, he sees only the image of his face. This is a word picture Peter is giving us to describe our trials and persecutions which come upon us. It describes what God is doing to us and in us. His hand is kindly using the furnace of suffering to heat up our faith. When that faith is heated it becomes soft and pliable, but more importantly, the impurities which are embedded deep within our soul become separated from our faith so they rise to the surface so God, by His gracious hand, can scrape them out of our lives, so what is left is a soul which is purer and a faith which is richer, more valuable, and treasured. It is a faith which brings us greater joy.

Peter tells us not to become embittered when we experience this kind of pain because God has a kind purpose in it. It is a purpose which, one day, we will look back and we will fall upon our faces in great joy and gratitude and say, “Thank you, God. Thank you for that hardship and pain and trial.” God is working His perfect design to conform us to the image of His Son. That is what we bought into when we came to follow Christ and it is a good purpose. God is going to finish His work as He perfects us.

John Brown writing about Christian suffering as being not surprising for believers says: “Suffering for Christ, in some form and degree or other; seems to be essential to the formation of the Christian character; and that character has usually reached nearest to perfection in those who have had the largest share of that kind of trial.”

The second reason we are not to become resentful toward God in our suffering is: We should expect a world which hates Jesus to treat us harshly. We should not be surprised by this. This is the nature of the world. When we come to Jesus Christ, our lives are united to His; they are closely tied to His. Peter writes, from our text,

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

This is not strange; it is logical and reasonable. Harassment toward those who stand with Jesus is the norm. We live in strange times when we are not persecuted for standing with Christ. Suffering is not alien to the believer. Jesus told us this in John 15,

¹⁸ *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ ...If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. ^{33b} In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

Why does the world hate the Jesus of the Bible so much? Jesus seems so lovable and so endearing. Why would anyone hate Him? Friends, we must get our ideas about Jesus from the Bible and not from the world. The world fashions a Jesus who is only endearing and only lovable to the world. He is a Jesus who ultimately submits to the world. But, the Jesus of the Bible is not so. The Jesus of the Bible always offends those who want to live according to their own rules. Jesus called sinners of all stripes to repent, to turn, to change, to confess sin. No one calls everyone to repent without receiving scorn. If we single out certain kinds of sinners, we might expect to escape the ridicule of at least some, if not most.

Yet, Jesus, when He calls sinners to repent, He calls sinners of every stripe and of every kind. He calls the self-righteousness to repent. He calls the sexually immoral to repent. He calls those who are greedy and full of avarice to repent. He calls those who are prideful to repent, He calls those who are idolatrous and who engage in the false worship of other gods to repent as well.

Furthermore, it is not just His courage in calling sinners to repentance, but it is His claim to be One with God the Father. He claims to be the only unique Way to God and to Heaven and He says all other ways are bogus and false.¹ The Jesus of the Bible is very intolerant to the sense there is only one way to have eternal life, and that is through Him and Him alone. Jesus claims absolute authority over the heart of every person. Jesus refuses to share His glory with any other ruler. Jesus calls us to be willing to leave everything to follow Him alone.² The world consumed by self-will

¹ John 14:6

² Matthew 19:16-22

cannot and will not abide by such a Jesus. Do not be surprised!

The second response Peter calls us to is: Rejoice as you share Christ's sufferings,

¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

The principle we learn from this exhortation is: Suffering for Christ provides us with opportunities to gain spiritual treasure. No one need be ashamed when he or she is standing with Jesus. This command is exhorting us not to be ashamed and not to hang our heads and hide our faces. Do not be ashamed of things that bring us glory and do not glory in things that bring us shame. Our suffering scorn and ridicule as the result of our allegiance to Christ is a badge of honor, not a mark of shame.

This world turns everything upside down in this way. This world glories in things that which should bring them shame. This week I was switching through channels on a radio station and heard the radio commentator say, very boldly and very joyfully, "I am in favor of premarital sex," and he kept saying that over and over again, glorying in that which should bring shame. He was rather impassioned about giving his credentials to the audience as being pro-fornication. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. It is everywhere and it is not just sexual sin, but it is all kinds of sin. Planned Parenthood boldly rejoices in providing and advertising services that snuff out the life of little babies. Name nearly any sin and we will find someone who glories openly in it. Very few sins are connected to shame today.

So, when a Christian for the sake of Christ is ridiculed in a classroom, or when they are disowned by members of their family, or when they are put in jail, or when they are ostracized by society, or when they are mocked by co-workers, these are not the ones who should be ashamed, for look who is standing with them, receiving the same kind of treatment - it is the King of Glory. At that moment, we are not suffering for our own sakes, but for His and we are sharing in the sufferings He receives. So, Peter says, "Rejoice!" These trials are God's opportunities for us to share with Jesus Christ the rewards and rich treasure.

What reward might we find when we share in His sufferings? Peter reminds of two joys which accompany this kind of suffering with Jesus. First, it is the reward of these miseries binding us closer to Christ, uniting us with Him in a deeper special union.

Joseph Tson is a Romanian pastor who suffered much for the cause of Christ. He stood up to Ceausescu's repressions of Christianity, and he wrote, "This union with Christ is the most beautiful subject in the Christian life. It means that I am not a lone fighter here: I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share His sufferings."³

We can rejoice because our pain is not our pain alone, but is also Christ's and this sharing with Christ is evidence of our union with Him and of our relationship with Him. I am thankful I have never had to experience war personally, but I have talked with many who have. One common blessing warriors experience is the close bonds made with those who share suffering together during wartime and battle. They describe these bonds as "unbreakable" and "lifelong" bonds. Shared suffering binds relationships more sweetly together. How much more is that true of believers when we share the sufferings of Christ, binding us eternally, specially, uniquely, and intimately to Jesus.

The second treasure we find ourselves receiving is: These miseries also bind us to the glory of Christ which is also coming. That is Peter's point,

¹³ ...that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

The path to enjoy His glory is the path of sharing His sufferings. Peter again reminds us of that future day which is very near and right at hand.⁴ This should excite us all the more about that future day.

³ Undated paper, A Theology of Martyrdom

⁴ 1 Peter 4:7

Let me use an earthly illustration to draw out the joy of this future day that will be ours. It is a very human and earthly illustration. Cub fans are suffering fans, are they not? 1908 was the last championship they experienced. Cub fans share in the suffering of the team. They remember things such as: The black cat; Leon Durham; and Bartman. They long for one day when, through a television set, they might share in the glory of a championship. If that day ever comes, those Cub fans are going to stand up and shout, "We won! We won!" Now, they are not on the team and they are not on the field, but they have shared in the sufferings, and as a result, if that day ever comes, they are also going to be able to share in the glory and in the joy. That is an earthly illustration and it is very feeble. It does not come close to the measure or the kind of glory which will be ours in Christ, but it helps us to understand when we share sufferings with someone so intimately and so closely, we can expect, on the day of victory, to share all the more intensely in the glory that is His. That is Peter's point.

Jesus says, in Matthew 5,

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..."*

Peter continues,

¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

The name of Christ means one is identified with the person and the work of Christ so that His name is upon us. This concept of bearing the name of Christ includes the ministry all of us have of proclaiming Christ, of witnessing in Christ, of baptizing others in the name of Christ, of praying in Christ's name. One commentator writes, "In the early Christian community the single word 'Name' was synonymous with the Christian religion." Someone would ask, "What religion are you?" and the person would reply, "Name." "Oh, you are a part of the Name religion?" "Yes, that is right." Those people were so closely united and tied to Jesus Christ and His Name.

Verse 14 is confirmation we are never alone when we are in fiery trials. We should let this verse sink deeply into our soul because the Spirit of Glory and of God rests in a special, sweet manner upon those who suffer with Jesus.

I love the Old Testament story of Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego. Into the fiery furnace they went and what happened? The king looked down and instead of seeing three men in the fiery furnace, he sees four. The Spirit of God and the Spirit of Glory is resting upon them so they were calm, they were at peace, and they were blessed. They experienced the Lord in a way they never would have had they not been thrown into that fiery furnace, and that is true of every believer.

The third response Peter points us to is: Do not let your sin be the cause of your sufferings,

¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

Peter communicates this principle: We gain no glory if we suffer as the result of our own sin. He names three sins which may cause us to land in jail, "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, thief or evildoer". We studied, in 1 Peter 2,

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Peter is talking about the role of government. If we suffer as a murderer, a thief, or an evil doer, it is right for the government to come after us and punish us.

Some brothers and sisters, in Peter's day, were imprisoned for their loyalty to Jesus. Nero the Emperor's persecution of the church had just begun as Peter writes this letter and it would continue with greater intensity over the next two hundred years. This letter is not only for his audience, but for the future as well to the 21st Century. Nero used Christians as a scapegoat for his own failings and for his ineptitude. The full weight of the government now turned against believers to the point it was criminal to say, "I am a Christian!" That was a crime against the Roman government.

Peter is teaching if a person finds himself or herself in prison as a result of their allegiance to Christ that is no shame. What happens when a person is carted off in a police cab with their hands tied behind their back? Don't they often hang their heads? They don't want anyone to see and they turn their faces away from the camera because there is shame with the guilt. If that ever happens to you for being a Christian, there is no need to hide your face because there is no shame in this, there is only glory.

Then Peter mentions another sin not identified with imprisonment, but with other forms of abuse such as mocking, ridicule, or isolation. He tells us not to suffer a "meddler". He sets this aside because it is not so much a criminal offense, but it is incurring personal, social wrath upon an individual as a result of being interested in the lives of others in an unhealthy way. It is being a troublemaker, a nuisance, a gossip, or a busy body. It is the opposite of being a peace maker. If the world holds us in contempt, let it not be because we are sticking our noses into other people's business. There is no glory in suffering for that reason. Sometimes Christians do suffer as a result of being a meddler. They believe they are suffering for the cause of Christ, but they are not. They are suffering because they have been unwise in their relationships.

The fourth response is: Consider it an honor to suffer for Christ,

¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

The title "Christian" is the one most often used in our modern times to identify and define the followers of Jesus, but in the New Testament the term Christian only appears three times, and almost always it is an indication of ridicule. While the world might mock us for our identity as "little Christs", let us never be ashamed of the name. While the world may mock us for our identity with Jesus, let us never be ashamed of the Name. What a name Jesus is!

Ashamed of Jesus! That dear Friend,
On whom my hopes of heaven depend!
No; when I blush, be this my shame,
That I have sinned against His name.⁵

We need never to be ashamed to suffer for the Name, but let him, Peter says, glorify God in that name. Let us become emboldened in our witness for that name. Peter leads us by example in this, in Acts 5. Early on, in Peter's ministry, the Pharisees called the Apostles in and they beat them. Then they charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and they let them go.

⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Do you glorify in that name? What a name it is!

Jesus, The name that charms our fears
and bids our sorrows cease;
tis music in the sinner's ears,
tis life and health and peace.⁶

Peter continues, and I love these verses,

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"⁷

⁵ "Jesus, and Shall It Every Be", Joseph Grigg, in Four Hymns on Divine Subjects, 1765.

⁶ "Jesus the Name That Charms Our Fears", Hymn 13, A Collection of Sacred Hymns for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Europe, 1840.

⁷ Proverbs 11:31

At first this seems to be a curious comfort the saints who are suffering. That it is time for judgment to begin with the House of God sounds ominous rather than comforting and encouraging. But, we need to notice the word “judgment” is not condemnation and it is not punishment. Romans 8:1, tells us, in Christ there is no condemnation and no fear of being punished by God for our sins. We will be judged and judgment will begin with the House of God, but we will not be judged under condemnation, but rather we will be judged unto salvation. Peter is talking to born-again believers who have already received the living hope God has planted in their soul as a result of the Resurrection. He is talking to them as to how Jesus Christ had died for their sins once for all, the Righteous for the unrighteous, to bring them to God.⁸ He has shared the Gospel of Jesus with them.

What is the “judgment for the Christian” and how does that begin with the House of God? It begins, first, in this life as God purifies us and He sets His heavy hand upon us before He sets His heavy hand upon unbelievers. Then, in the future, there is the Judgment Seat of Christ and this preceded the Great White Throne of Judgment. God is concerned about the purity of the church and sin in the church, even among His own people. Here is the logic Peter is presenting: If God is concerned about sin among His own people whom He has already saved, think about what will happen to those who are outside of Christ, whose sin is still attached to their soul.

Am I saying the Bible threatened unbelievers? Yes, and it is not an idle threat. It is real. This is the Law. This is God’s character and His Eternal Person. He is offering us a way to escape condemnation and the sin attached to our soul. The Gospel is to be obeyed. We have sinned against a Holy God. God in His love sent a Savior to rescue us and every one who would come to believe in Him would never perish, but they would have eternal life. That is the Gospel.

But, those who refuse to obey the Gospel, those who refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, are outside of God’s grace. If judgment begins with the House of God, how much more will judgment be and what will the outcome be for those who do not obey God’s sweet offer?

The fifth response Peter calls us to is: Entrust your soul to the faithful Creator,

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

I believe this is the summary of the whole. God is able to keep that which we commit to His care so we must commit our soul to Him. Even as we endure sufferings, we do not need to fear because we have committed our soul to God. Remember, Jesus upon the cross said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”⁹

God protects us and God keeps us. God does not have anything outside of His control. Peter tells us to “trust our soul to the faithful Creator”. That is the only time in all of the Bible that title is used of God. In fact, the term “Creator” is only used three times in the New Testament. This prompts the question: Why does Peter employ that title for God? He could have said for us to trust ourselves to “the Loving Father”, “the Gentle Shepherd”, “the Holy One”, or dozens of other titles. Peter wants us to think back to Genesis Chapters 1 and 2, when nothing existed and God, in His wisdom and power, said, “Let there be,” and the world came to be. He wants to consider the faithfulness of God throughout all of human history in His power and Sovereign control.

When our life is in chaos and we have people who come against us and imprison us, they beat us, they threaten us, they mock us, and they push us down, it is easy at time to ask, “God, where are you? Are You really in control?” Peter is reminding us to understand the God we serve is a Faithful Creator; He is in control from the beginning when there was nothing and He said, “Let there be...” and He will be in control all the way into eternity. We can entrust ourselves; we are safe with Him. Nothing slips outside of His Sovereign care. God is able to keep that which we commit to His care.

I will close with some words from Wayne Grudem, which may be an encouragement: “Upon reflection no better comfort in suffering can be found than this: it is God’s good and perfect will. For therein lies the knowledge that there is a limit to the suffering, both in its intensity and in its duration, a limit set and maintained by the God who is our creator, our Saviour, our sustainer, our Father. And therein also lays the knowledge that this suffering is only for our

⁸ 1 Peter 3:18

⁹ Luke 23:46

good: it is purifying us, drawing us closer to our Lord, and making us more like him in our lives.” What a truth this is that we can build our lives upon. This is a theology which works!