

“A Faithful Creator”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 4:12-19; Isaiah 11:1-16

Peter’s purpose in writing his first epistle is to comfort persecuted Christians in Asia Minor, many of whom who have been displaced from their homes because of a decree from the Roman emperor Claudius. Peter has reminded them that despite their struggles, in God’s eyes, they are elect exiles, citizens of heaven, and when worshipping together they compose God’s spiritual house (the church)—And this even while they are sojourning upon the earth until the day of final judgment when God will dispense his covenant blessings and curses. Through a lengthy series of imperatives (commands), Peter has told these struggling Christians how they are to differentiate themselves from the Greco-Roman pagans around them—through their profession of faith in the Triune God who sent his Son to die for his people’s sins, and through their honorable conduct before the Pagans. Christians are to think and live as God’s people—they must live a life of self control, in contrast to their pagan neighbors who live to indulge every urge of the sinful flesh. But even if Christians do all of the things Peter exhorts them to do, they should not be surprised if their struggles continue and the persecution they face remains intense. As Peter has stated in verse 4 of chapter 4, the pagans “*are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.*” Evil-doers want nothing more than for professing Christians to join them in their self-indulgence. Having made this point in the first part of the chapter Peter now describes their troubles as a fiery trial, and a time of judgment. Yet, this is also a time in which God’s purposes will be realized, and through which these struggling Christians will grow in their faith.

We return this morning to our series on 1 Peter. As we conclude our time in chapter 4, Peter acknowledges that his readers and hearers have been through very difficult times, so much so, in verse 12, Peter writes, “*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.*” Some commentators take Peter’s statement as a warning of an impending calamity, and that extending this warning is the reason why Peter sends this letter to Christians of the Diaspora in Asia Minor.¹ In other words for those hearing/reading Peter’s letter, things have been bad, but they are about to get a whole lot worse. Peter is writing to warn them in advance so that his readers and hearers can prepare themselves for what is about to come.

But most commentators take the view—I think correctly—that verse 12 of chapter 4 begins a new section of the letter in which Peter is not warning of an impending trial, but is instead making the point that Christians must realize that professing faith in Christ, as they have been doing in the midst of a pagan culture, is itself a fiery trial.² In fact, Peter made this point clear back in chapter 1 vv. 6-8 when he wrote,

¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, I & II Peter and Jude, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 118-119.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), imported from Logos on 4:12; Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 164.

“for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 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. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” The Christians to whom Peter is writing are being put to the test. They are undergoing a fiery trial—yet a trial with an important purpose. The time of trial is difficult in itself, yet it is that much worse if there is no seeming purpose to it. Peter’s point then is to remind the Christians of Asia Minor that the fiery trial they are currently experiencing has a purpose, and that keeping this in mind will help them endure their trying circumstances.

Peter knows that Christians who expect the Christian life to be a bed of roses, and one in which everyone will love them and think it wonderful that they are believers in Jesus Christ, are being utterly naive. Being a Christian while living among the pagans is a fiery trial in its own right. As Peter has already stated, God allows these trials to test us, so as to refine our faith like a precious metal worker uses a furnace to purify and strengthen the metals with which he works. Therefore the trials facing the Christians of the Diaspora are not random acts of a universe out of control. These trials are sent by God (in these sense of God allowing them,) to test these Christian’s faith, and to refine them to even greater purity (holiness). Christians should keep in mind that all such trials have a purpose. This is why Peter can tell his readers that Christians should *“not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* There is no prosperity gospel taught by the Apostle Peter. Peter is convinced of the reality that suffering and trials are often part of life in a fallen world. As our Savior endured his trial, so must we.

Although no one wants to suffer—and Peter is not teaching a form of masochism (finding joy in pain and suffering), or the Russian Orthodox doctrine that we are saved from our sins to the degree we suffer and are purified from them (as in Dostoevsky)—suffering is one of the means God uses to strengthen our faith. Let me put it this way. Do you tend to seek God more when times are good, or when things go bad? Do you tend to pray more during times of trial or uncertainty, or in good times? God is not being mean to us, or punishing us, when he allows us to suffer and endure trials. Because God is with us in such trials, he uses them to draw us to himself, and so that we learn over the course of our lives to trust him more and more for those promises which we cannot see. The consequence from enduring these trials is that we will appreciate the good times and blessings and give thanks for them with the same fervor with which we seek God when things go wrong. This is how trials strengthen faith and draw us close to God.

Peter is not alone in using language of fiery trial. John warns of the fiery trials to come upon Babylon (Rome) in Revelation 18. There the image of a fiery trial is one of God’s judgment upon unbelievers. But Peter instead is using the metaphor as in Proverbs 27:21, where we read, *“the crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise.”* The refining fire draws out the dross and purifies us from the guilt and power of sin. This process increases our praise for God. The trials these Christians were experiencing were a refining process which reveals the genuineness of their faith and should not be seen as something unexpected. Christians know that such things will come because we live in a fallen world, and we should prepare for them well in advance.

There is also another consequence of such trials. As Charles Cranfield reminds us, “those whose Christianity is not real vanish from the ranks at the approach of danger.”³ This fact, no doubt, explains

³ Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 119.

the decline in the vitality, numbers, and theological commitment among American Evangelicals, now that American culture is increasingly secularized and Christians are losing some of our privileged status. Those who identify themselves as Christians, but who are truly not, will drop out quickly when they first encounter even a hint of persecution, or when someone criticizes them for their Christian beliefs.

But since Christians are believers in Jesus, who himself experienced suffering unto death upon the cross before being raised to glory on Easter Sunday, Christians cannot expect to follow a different path from that of their master. What is more, the degree to which we share in his suffering, is the degree to which he shares in ours.⁴ This is why Peter can exhort his readers in verse 13, “*but rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*” Here, the critical question is, “what does it mean to share in Christ’s suffering?” Throughout the New Testament, the phrase the “sufferings of Christ” refers to Jesus’ entire life—from the moment of his miraculous conception in the womb of the virgin until the moment of his death upon the cross. Because it is Jesus’ suffering which saves us from the guilt and power of sin, his suffering is said to be once for all. This is what theologians mean when speaking of Christ’s state of humiliation. Of course, we do not share in Christ’s redemptive work, except in the sense that because we are in union with Christ through faith, we share in all of his saving benefits.

But there is a profound sense then that we share in Christ’s suffering because we share in his humiliation. If Jesus was hated because he was without sin in a world of sinners, we can expect the same treatment when we profess Jesus as Lord and trust in his suffering to save us from our sins. The irony is that Jesus encountered far more opposition at first from the self-righteous Jewish religious leaders than he did from the Jewish people. Yet, many of the people too eventually turned on Jesus when they realized that he had not come to deliver them from their hated Roman occupiers, whose soldiers were billeted adjacent to the Jerusalem temple and were constantly seen throughout the city and the nation.

In the situation in which Peter’s audience finds itself—Greco-Roman paganism of Asia Minor—Christians are distrusted by the political authorities because they would not worship Caesar as a god, nor would they participate in the worship of the pantheon of gods, which dominated Greco-Roman life. Because of this, Christians were often called “atheists” and were viewed as subversives—i.e., that Christians rejected all legitimate forms of government because they would not worship Caesar as a god. This is why Peter spends so much time in the previous chapters reinforcing the point that Christians accept much of the Greco-Roman household code, despite various corruptions of it, because it was grounded in natural law.

Because Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God, they were eventually excluded from the local synagogues where Christians had gone to teach that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. Rome tolerated Judaism, because of Roman respect for its antiquity. But as Christians began meeting on their own apart from the synagogues, Christians no longer enjoyed the legal protection which Jews did. Furthermore, as Peter has already mentioned, because Christians would not join in pagan activities focused upon indulging the lusts of the flesh, they were viewed with great antagonism by their Greco-Roman neighbors. Who were these people who strove to love their brothers and sisters, who demonstrated humility to those with power over them, and who were modest, chaste, and unwilling to compromise their allegiance to Jesus?

As Christians were increasingly ostracized for all of these reasons, they could identify more and more with the sufferings which Jesus endured, especially in his rejection by his own people, who at his trial

⁴ Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 120.

were shouting for the release of Barabbas, a notorious revolutionary. As Jesus was despised and rejected, same thing is often true of his followers who are often seen as a threat to the government, and as a threat to the freedom of those who live to indulge the flesh. This is why Peter can write to these Christians do “*not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*” In fact, Peter tells Christians to rejoice when those occasions arise when they are privileged to share in the sufferings of their master.

In verse 14, Peter goes on remind his struggling hearers of the great paradox in this, “*if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.*” Here, Peter’s words virtually echo the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:11-12. “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” The irony is that those who curse and revile Christians, are actually providing a means through which God blesses his people. This is why God’s people are to rejoice and be glad when they suffer because such trials and suffering become a means through which God is glorified.

The unusual language of verse 14, “*because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you,*” is actually a loud echo from Isaiah 11, our Old Testament lesson this morning. In verse 2 of Isaiah 11, we read, “*and the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*” In Isaiah’s prophecy, one important characteristic of the coming Messiah is that the Holy Spirit shall rest upon Israel’s messianic king, equipping him for his messianic work. Remarkably, Peter adds that the same thing now holds true for all of those who are Jesus Christ’s, that the Holy Spirit rests upon them just as he did upon Jesus.⁵

Peter’s word of comfort to those in the midst of the fiery trial is that God’s people participate in all the blessings Jesus provides for them. Because we are identified with Jesus in his suffering (and in his humiliation) so too Christians possess the same Holy Spirit who indwelt Jesus. This is how we are united to our Savior in his sufferings. As recounted in Acts 9:4, Jesus confronts Paul while he was on his way to Damascus. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Jesus can say that Paul was persecuting him because Paul had been persecuting Jesus’ people, which is but another way of saying believers are in union with the ascended Christ. In Paul’s writings, “union with Christ” is a major theme. By virtue of this union, “Christians are said to be crucified with Christ, dead with him, raised with him, and seated on the right hand of the Majesty with him (e.g., Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:1, 3).” In Ephesians 1:17, Paul cites Isaiah 11:2 and applies it to believers.⁶

In 2 Timothy 2:12, Paul declares that if we endure suffering with Jesus, we will reign with him. This leads one writer to conclude, “so perhaps it is not so strange to conclude that the Spirit of the Lord, poured out on the Messiah, who suffered for their redemption, will also be poured out on Messiah’s people when they too suffer on the Messiah’s behalf.”⁷ If we are united to Jesus through faith and receive his saving benefits, then we will suffer with him, precisely because we will participate in the

⁵ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2007), 1041.

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redemption he has won for his people. Christians must realize that we will suffer because of our union with Christ, but that Christ has a purpose for us in such suffering, and that the same Holy Spirit who rested upon Jesus, now rests upon us. God is both blessing us and bringing glory to himself.

Christians must understand that the suffering to which the Apostle refers comes about because his readers and hearers are believers in Jesus, not because they have actually committed wrong-doing and are paying the price for their actions. In verse 15, Peter puts it this way, *“but let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.”* Wrong-doers can expect to be punished. If you kill someone, or steal someone’s valuable property, if you commit evil (in a public and rebellious way), or if you interfere in matters pertaining to another (i.e., you stick your nose into other’s people business where it does not belong), then, of course, you will suffer. In fact, you should suffer under such circumstances. But the kind of suffering Peter has been describing is that which we suffer because of our faith in Jesus.

Knowing that the curses coming from outsiders guarantee blessing from God, and that being reviled for the sake of Christ comes with being a Christian, Peter can encourage us that *“if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”* God’s people should see it as an honor to be identified with the sufferings of Christ because this brings glory to God. Again, we identify ourselves to the non-Christians around us not by wearing distinctive “Christian” clothing, or by abstaining from certain foods, or by withdrawing from non-Christians. There is the sense that if this is how we identify ourselves, then we have actually given non-Christians grounds to revile us. We make ourselves targets of people’s ire. It is one thing if non-Christians are offended by the gospel. This comes with being a Christian. It is quite another thing if they are offended by the weird things we do.

But if we have identified ourselves by our honorable conduct before the watching Gentiles, if we have identified ourselves by not living to satisfy the passions of the flesh, if we have identified ourselves by following the example of Jesus’ humility in the presence of those with power over us, if we have identified ourselves by our profession of faith in the God of the Bible, and in his son Jesus Christ, then we have nothing about which to be ashamed. Yes, we will face the ire of the unbelievers around us when we do these things. But in this case, Peter is pressing us to see that the real question is, “are we ashamed of Jesus Christ?” in whose humiliation we have been called to share. If we’ve done something for which we ought to be ashamed, so be it. But we should never be ashamed to identify with our Savior, even when there is a price to be paid. So far, Christians in America have had it very easy. Those days may be coming to an end with the ever-increasing secularization of our society. Peter speaks to that very situation. Count it joy to be identified with the sufferings of our Savior when non-Christians revile us.

Even if our suffering has a purpose, there is still yet another reason why God is allowing this difficult season for the Christians in Asia Minor. Peter raises it in verse 17—and it is not an easy subject. *“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?”* Peter is loosely quoting from Ezekiel 9:5-6, although similar language can be found in Zechariah 13:9 and Malachi 3:1-3. Israel’s prophets were clearly speaking of that eschatological judgment to come upon Israel because of Israel’s disobedience to the covenant God had made with them at Sinai, and because Israel would reject her own Messiah when he came to save his people from their sins. In the case of Israel and in the light of the warnings of the prophets, God’s judgment was absolutely appropriate because his people have repeatedly broken the terms of their covenant with YHWH, and God’s judgment is fully deserved.

But in the case of Peter’s readers and hearers, they are suffering injustice at the hands of godless pagans, solely because they are followers of Jesus. These people have embraced Jesus as their Messiah. They

were suffering because of it. Is Peter now saying that they too have done something to bring about their own difficult circumstances? Are they being punished by God? No. The Christians in Asia Minor are not being punished because they have provoked God to wrath. Peter has just spoken of a fiery ordeal which has for its purpose, in part, the testing and strengthening the faith of God's people. It is possible that the term translated as "judgment" (*krima*) might refer to the process (God is demonstrating that he is judge through their current circumstances) and not the outcome—Christians are being punished because they are under God's judgment. God's people are in the midst of God working out his purposes for all—believer and unbelievers alike. In their case, God's purpose calls for him to begin his final judgment with those who are his (i.e., in the household of God). One thing is certain—those who are not truly Christ's, but are temporarily professing faith, will head for the exit when the going gets rough.

That this is the case is made clear in verse 18. "*And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'"*" Peter alludes to Proverbs 11:31, "*if the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!*" In its context, the Proverb is essentially asserting that "crime does not pay."⁸ This points in direction of the fact that if God allows the righteous to suffer in this life (through various trials), then the wicked had better realize how much worse final judgment is going to be for them.

It is one thing to realize that in God's sovereign plan, his judgment begins with his own people as they face trials and tribulations which strengthen their faith. It is quite another thing to realize that God's judgment ends with the eternal punishment of the wicked. The sense here is probably that of Luke 13:22–24, where Luke recounts that Jesus "*went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' And he said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'*" The Christian life is not easy, and those who find it to be too much will not endure. According to Peter, God's judgment begins in his own household—making sure his people trust in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection to save them from God's final judgment and secure their heavenly inheritance, and then out of gratitude, we live honorable lives before the Gentiles.

In a sense then, these two verses amount to Peter challenging his readers to persevere to the end—i.e., that the Christian life is not easy and that believers will face all kinds of trials and suffering, all of which are part of God's purpose (his judging) for his people. In verse 16, Peter spoke of the joy it should bring us to be identified with Jesus in his suffering. Now he tells us that we should never be envious or jealous of those who have it easy because they do not follow Jesus. Those who reject Christ and persecute his people will suffer far more (and such a greater way) than anything struggling Christians experience in this life.⁹ It is God's purpose that Christians struggle now (as Jesus did). But it is also God's purpose that believers triumph in the end (as Jesus did). Non-Christians may avoid such struggles in this life, but they will face God's fury in the next.

In light of this sobering realization, Peter concludes, "*therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*" Because judgment begins with God's own people—purifying them and strengthening their faith, Christians can do nothing but commit themselves into God's hands as Jesus did at his supreme moment of suffering recounted in Luke 23:46,

⁸ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1042.

⁹ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1042.

“Father into your hands I commit my Spirit.” If God calls us to periods of suffering and times of trial let us follow the example of Jesus and trust ourselves to God’s care in our darkest moments. This is not a fatalistic or stoic resolution to just take what God sends our way. Rather, this is part of the “doing good” for which Peter calls, and which also includes obedience to the imperatives Peter has been spelling out in the earlier chapters. No doubt, it is a good thing to commit ourselves to a faithful creator, who brings fiery trials into our lives to strengthen our faith, purify our lives, and draw us unto himself. Judgment may begin in the household of God, but the final word on this subject is God’s judgment upon sin when Jesus dies for us upon Calvary’s cross.

We should never glory in trials and persecutions, as though these were good things—they are not, especially when others commit acts of evil toward us, or belittle us because of our faith in Christ, or mock us because we refuse to indulge the sinful flesh as they do. Rather, in the midst of trials, we give glory to God, because Jesus has suffered for us and in our place to save us from our sins. He has given us his blessed Holy Spirit, who unites us to Jesus in his suffering. And just as Jesus committed his spirit to his Father while suffering upon the cross, so too we commit ourselves to a faithful creator whose only begotten Son saves us from our sins, and secures for us a heavenly inheritance greater than anything our minds can imagine. And this, beloved, is how and why we endure the fiery trials of life.