

“THE FIERY TRIAL”

I. INTRODUCTION

Today we come to the last part of 1 Peter 4. The preceding sections of chapter 4 have shown us how God wants us to live, first showing us the things that we must avoid, and then showing us the things that we must do. In today’s passage, the focus shifts to another aspect of the Christian life: accepting our trials as an essential component of God’s will for our salvation.

II. DO NOT BE SURPRISED

These verses directly confront our tendency to respond to trials by asking, ‘Why me?’, or ‘What have I done to deserve this?’ Peter says that Christians should not be surprised that they experience trials. Now, it is not that Peter was being insensitive, or that he was unaware of the hardships that these Christians were facing. Peter himself had firsthand experience of what it meant to share in Christ’s sufferings. He was there when Jesus suffered and died on the cross. He was probably present when Stephen was stoned to death for his Christian testimony. He saw Herod put the apostle James to death, after which he himself was thrown into prison. Peter knew very well what it meant to suffer for his faith. He is not making light of the sufferings of these, or any other, Christians.

Remember how the passage begins: Peter addresses them by the name “Beloved.” He loved these Christians. That is why he was writing to them.

And he wanted them, and he wants all of us, God wants all of us, to understand Christian suffering from a biblical point of view. We should not be surprised when the world opposes us or oppresses us because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Our Lord himself said that this would happen:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (Mt. 5:11)

“[Y]ou will be hated by all for my name's sake.” (Mk. 13:13)

“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.” (Jn. 15:19)

Christians should expect to suffer for their faith. That is why our text says, “do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you.” It says “when,” not “if.”

God has an important purpose for this trial. That is why Peter describes it as “the fiery trial.” Fire can bring about destruction, but it can also be used to refine and purify. In this context, fire is clearly a metaphor for purification. God uses our trials to test and refine our faith. However, this does not happen automatically. As we all know, we can respond to our trials with self-pity, or doubt, or worry, or bitterness, or denial, or despair. And in some cases, trials end up destroying a person’s faith. Jesus spoke of this in his parable of the sower, when he compared such people to the seed that was sown on the rocky ground and therefore had no root. Jesus said: “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.” (Mk. 4:17) God does use trials to perfect our faith, but it is not automatic. The thing that makes the difference is whether our profession of faith is the result of the gospel truly sinking down into the depths of our being. Does our faith have roots from which it can draw strength when the time of trial comes? Has the imperishable seed of God’s living and abiding word been planted in the soil of our hearts? If it has, then God will use our trials to perfect our faith.

We see an example of this in Psalm 73. The psalmist admits that he had almost given himself over to bitterness, but in the end he declares:

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh

and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

(vv. 23-26)

Is that how you respond when the fiery trial comes upon you? Is God the strength of your heart? Is he your portion? Is he your heart's desire, even more than you desire earthly happiness and comfort? If so, then you can be certain that the Lord is using your trials to refine your faith and to make you fit for heaven.

III. SHARING IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS AND GLORY

Instead of seeing our trials as something strange, we should take them as an assurance of the fact that we really are united to Jesus Christ. We really are one with him. We really do have communion with him. We share in his life, and so we also share in his sufferings. It is a great honor, a great privilege, to suffer for Jesus' sake. There are a number of ways in which Christians share in Christ's sufferings. At some times and in some places, sharing in Christ's sufferings means persecution, and even martyrdom. That was the fate of all but one of the apostles, of the church father Polycarp, of the apologist Justin Martyr, of early Reformers such as Hus, Savonarola and Tyndale, of thousands of the Scottish Covenanters, and of a number of contemporary Christians in countries like Sudan.

Martyrdom is one way in which Christians share in Christ's sufferings, but it is not the only way. Christians sometimes face injustice and inequity, unfair treatment, simply because of their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Christians are often the object of scorn and ridicule. You may never face the threat of martyrdom, but there are going to be plenty of times in your life when your love for Christ is going to cost you. Do not shrink back at those moments. Do not be ashamed. It is an honor to share in Christ's sufferings, and it is also a confirmation that you will also share in his glory. Yes, the world crucified Jesus, but he did not remain in the tomb. He endured the shame of the cross for the sake of the joy that was set before him. He is risen. He is seated at God's right hand. He has received power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. And he promises to share that glory with everyone who shares in his sufferings, everyone who overcomes the trials and temptations of this life by clinging to him in faith. And he even gives us a foretaste of that glory, because he has sent the Spirit of glory to rest upon us. Jesus has not left us alone; he has come to us. He is present with us, just as he promised when he said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (Jn. 14:18) When you share in Christ's sufferings, you can be certain that you are also united to him in his glory. Your life truly is hidden with Christ in God.

This is a glorious truth and an inexpressible joy, and yet it is so easy for us to lose sight of just how wonderful it really is. Our earthly-mindedness causes us to prefer present happiness over the glories that await us in heaven. How quickly we forget the glaring

deficiency with everything that brings happiness and comfort in this life. Nothing in this life is going to last. The greatest pleasures that this world has to offer will all fade away. They cannot provide lasting happiness and eternal joy. This is why C.S. Lewis wrote these words in his book *The Four Loves*,

“There is no good applying to heaven for earthly comfort. Heaven can give heavenly comfort; no other kind. And earth cannot give earthly comfort either. There is no earthly comfort in the long run.” (*The Four Loves*, p. 190)

The glory that the Scriptures promise to Christians is a glory that will produce eternal joy. On the day when that glory is revealed, your sufferings for the sake of Christ in this life will seem to have been less than nothing.

IV. JUDGMENT BEGINS HERE

This brings us to verse 17, where Peter says, “it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.” What does this mean? In what sense can the church be said to be experiencing God’s judgment? Well, consider what will take place on the day of judgment. The day of judgment will be the day when the Lord completely purges his renewed creation of all sin and evil. Isn’t that what the Lord is already doing in the lives of those who belong to Jesus Christ? God is already purging sin from the lives of the

redeemed. And he uses our trials to do it. God is using your trials to prepare you for judgment day. He is refining your faith so that it will pass the test and prove to be genuine when you stand before him on that Great Day.

This is closely related to what verse 18 means when it says that the righteous is “scarcely saved” or, as the NASB puts it, saved “with difficulty.” This does not mean that we will just barely squeak by on the day of judgment. Instead, it is the same thing that Paul and Barnabas said when they told the Christians at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch that it is “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22) Peter is underscoring the fact that the Christian life is not a life of ease and earthly comfort. It is a cross-bearing life. Why is this so? Listen to these words from John Piper:

“[Jesus] calls us to follow him in his sufferings because this life of joyful suffering for Jesus’ sake shows that he is more valuable than all the earthly rewards that the world lives for. If you follow Jesus only because he makes life easy now, it will look to the world as though you really love what they love, and Jesus just happens to provide it for you.” (*What Jesus Demands of the World*, 71)

This is why popular teachers like Joel Osteen, author of the bestselling book *Your Best Life Now*, are actually leading people astray. The gospel makes no promise of “your best life now,” at least not in the sense that Osteen means it. Salvation is not easy. It is free,

but it is not cheap. There is a cost to Christian discipleship. That is what Peter is talking about here. That is what he means when he says that judgment has begun with the household of God.

For Christians, God's judgment is discipline. But for the people of the world, the people who do not obey the gospel of God, for them God's judgment will be something else altogether. For them, it is condemnation. We see this in 1 Cor. 11:32, where Paul writes: "But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world." On judgment day, Christians will exchange their earthly trials for eternal life, while non-Christians will exchange their earthly pleasures for eternal damnation. It may seem as though the ungodly prosper in this life, but that is only because, as John Calvin puts it, God "fattens the wicked for the day of slaughter."

V. CONCLUSION

Where do you fit into this picture? What does judgment mean for you? What is the fiery trial for you? Is it a fire that refines, or is it a fire that brings destruction? Are you being refined for the day when Christ's glory will be revealed? Or are you being fattened for slaughter? In other words, are you obeying the gospel of God? I hope that you are. If not, then I hope that you will obey it soon, perhaps even today. Repent, believe, and follow Jesus Christ. That is what it means to obey the gospel. It really is as easy as that.

Sermon on 1 Peter 4:12-19
OT Reading: Psalm 73

Grace PC, Laconia (2/24/08)
An Exposition of 1 Peter, No. 17
Rev. Andy Wilson

But it will also cost you dearly. It will cost you your life. You see, believing in Jesus means loving him more than anything else. It means believing that living in submission to Christ is worth any amount of inconvenience, or hardship, or struggle, or sacrifice, or self-denial, or tribulation. It means believing that you really can entrust your soul to him. He is your refuge. He is the strength of your heart. He is your portion forever. Is he truly those things in your life? I pray that he is, because he is the only portion that will last forever.