



Pursuing Christ in a Pagan World

Series: Don't Be Taken By Surprise...

1 Peter 4:12-19

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Introduction: As we come to the end of this section of exhortation and encouragement by Peter, I want to make sure that we understand where Peter is coming from, the foundation and the mindset from which he writes. When Peter talks to us about suffering, we need to understand that Peter's focus is not upon the suffering that is common to man as a result of living in a fallen, death-filled world. Peter's view of suffering in this text is not sickness, life-threatening illness, the death of loved ones, financial reversal, relational issues, disappointment, adversity or other things like that. Surely Christ is a salve to those things; He redeems even this sort of suffering as a testimony to His sufficiency – we can face sickness because Christ has ultimately healed us of our greatest sickness – sin, we can face the death of our loved ones in Christ knowing that Christ has conquered death on the cross and we do not grieve as those that have no hope, financial reversal does not destroy us because Christ is our treasure, relational issues are never hopeless because Christ is the one who can break down the walls of separation, disappointment is not debilitating because Christ is our hope. Adversity is not unwelcome because it refines our faith and strengthens us. Christ has a word for us in those things but that is not the focus here.

Peter's focus in this section is narrowed from the trials that are common to all human beings to the trials, the persecutions, that come as a result of faithfully following Christ, the trials that come as a result of choosing the path of obedience to Jesus Christ, the trials that come as a result of earnestly pursuing God's call upon our lives, the trials that come as a result of faithful adherence to the Word of God, the persecution that comes with living a bold and loving life in the name of Christ, the persecution that comes from unwavering commitment to Christ, from unwavering commitment to the gospel, from living courageously and worthy of your calling in Christ Jesus. These ones to whom Peter was writing, if not had not yet, they would soon be facing severe persecution for their faithfulness to Christ. The great Neronian persecution was imminent if it had not already started. Nero would have Christians covered with pitch and burn them as human torches to light his garden parties. Or, he would feed them to the lions in the arena as public sport. Christians were beheaded, cast into dungeons, sentenced to exile, torn with hooks, stretched on the rack, covered in boiling pitch, mauled by wild animals...Persecution because of Christ was a certain reality.

While we think of persecution as mainly a historical fact, it isn't. The persecution of Christians is not just ancient history, but, rather, very current history. The life of Christians in China, Sudan, North Korea, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria, Cuba, Uganda, Iran, Iraq and Laos is extremely hard and dangerous. In the Moslem country of Sudan, for instance, Christians are given several options: They can either convert to Islam, or they can flee, be killed, be raped, have their children taken from them or be taken as slaves. Following Jesus Christ faithfully involves a price, and the cost of discipleship is billed to believers in many different ways. If we follow Christ faithfully, we may not face the physical persecution in this nation, at least not as a government action, but there will be persecution. We must expect to be mocked, ridiculed, laughed at, discounted, hated without cause, harassed, shunned, rejected, despised, alienated, scorned and derided. Peter knows this is true and so he tells his readers:

1) We should not be surprised at the fiery trials that come upon us but rather rejoice that we have been found worthy to share in Christ's sufferings. (v.12-13) I want you to first notice Peter's heart in this. He calls them beloved. He wants them to remember that they are loved of God. He wants again to remind them of God's deep, enduring, passionate, steadfast love for them even as they face the trials and the suffering that is part of being Christ's people. He wants them to remember that God is for them, that they are the beloved people of God. This is important because one of the first things Satan would like to do in the midst of persecution for Christ's sake is to create doubt about God's love in the minds of God's people. But Paul assures us that God's love to His people is a constant, unwavering truth saying in Romans 8: **(Rom 8:35-39)** This certain reminder of God's love is vitally important because of the certainty of persecution that comes to faithful followers of Christ. That is why Peter says for us not to be surprised at the fiery trials that come upon us.

First, don't be surprised that we face them. Jesus told us that we would. **(Joh 15:18-20; Mat 10:24-25)** These trials should not be a surprise. They are part and parcel of what it means to follow Christ.

Moreover, we shouldn't be surprised at their intensity. There is no other name that brings as strong and as visceral a response as the name of Jesus Christ and there is nothing that brings such division as the gospel of Christ faithfully and powerfully proclaimed with lips and life. You cannot hold the gospel faithfully and proclaim the gospel accurately and be loved by all or even many. People hated the message when Christ brought it and they still don't like it and they resent those who proclaim it and live it before the world.

Neither should we be surprised at their source. Up in verse 4, Peter says it is your former friends that will malign you. It could be co-workers, our employers, our government, even and especially our own families. Jesus said: **(Mat 10:34-36)** We have seen that to be true. We should not be surprised if we are opposed by those in our own family, or even by those in the

church. Jesus told His disciples that they would be beaten in synagogues – that is, by the religious people. Christ was crucified at the instigation of the religious leaders of Israel. Just like the Pharisees of Christ's day, there are a host of people in the church that hide their sin behind a mask of spirituality and comparative morality. They don't like having their sin uncovered by the lives of those who live and proclaim the message of the cross. So, as Christians, we should not be surprised by trials—not by their certainty, not by their intensity, and not by their source.

Peter tells us not to be surprised by the trials that we face, **but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.** Peter means for us to see our sufferings in light of the sufferings of Jesus Christ for us. God's purpose, His will, for our suffering must be seen in light of the suffering of Christ who **suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)**

In the wonder of God's design, it was His will that Christ should suffer for us, and by His suffering save us. We now share in Christ's sufferings, not in the sense that we can add to His work in suffering for us --Christ suffered once for sins. Rather, Peter's point is this: When we suffer as Christians, there is a sense in which we share Christ's sufferings. Made righteous by Him, we suffer now as the righteous with Him. As we suffer with Christ and on account of Him, we are linked to Him and our sufferings, with joy, witness to His own sufferings for the joy that was set before Him of redeeming a people for Himself. When we live and teach and preach the gospel, when we love Christ supremely and encounter affliction and persecution for His sake, we participate in Christ's sufferings.

Beloved, make sure you understand. God has a purpose in our suffering, in the persecution that we suffer, in our trials. There is divine purpose in affliction and trial for the sake of Christ. God makes us to pass through the testing fire of trial not because He hates us or purposes evil toward us, but because we are His beloved, because He deeply loves us and wills our purity and our joy. He wills our purity and our joy. God uses trial for His name's sake in us to purify us, to burn away unbelief and to strengthen and harden our faith. He alone knows the depth of our sin, the extent of our self-trust, the shallowness of our joy. So the Lord graciously sends trials to test our faith. He uses trials to burn away love for this world and its ways and to stoke in our souls an increasing love for God, reliance upon Him, and a longing to see Him face to face. He uses trial to burn away the desire to please men and to instill an ever-increasing desire to please God. As we suffer on behalf of the gospel, as we join with our Savior in suffering unjustly at the hands of sinners, it gives us a window on the far greater suffering that He endured to redeem us. That draws our hearts into a deeper love for Him and makes us willing to suffer whatever we must for His sake. And our endurance of suffering for Christ's sake becomes a pledge to us of the reality of our belonging to Him, the reality of our union with Him. That reality causes our hearts to rejoice assuring us that we belong to Him and do truly love Him. It

emboldens our confidence as well, knowing that if we suffer for Christ and with Christ, according to God's will, we will enter into His eternal glory.

And that is why Peter is telling us to **rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.** Peter is not in any way diminishing the reality and severity and the weight of suffering. In fact, Peter uses two different Greek words that are both translated as rejoicing or gladness in this verse and we need to understand what Peter is saying contextually. At the first, when Peter calls us to rejoice, he is talking about having a real, indestructible, transforming sense, that God sovereignly controls the events of life for the believers' good and His glory. That is spiritual joy. And that joy, that deep, abiding trust in God's sovereignty and His purpose and His love and His trustworthiness in the midst of suffering will lead to the experience of this second word for rejoice – it will lead to exaltation, jubilation, skipping, and bubbling over, leaping for joy when we see Christ revealed in His glory because we know that we are His for we have suffered with Him. It will lead to overwhelming expressions of joy when we see our Savior revealed in His glory for we shall know by our sufferings that we are His and He is ours. In fact Peter goes so far as to say:

2) Persecution for Christ is a blessing. (v.14-16) Look at what he says **(1Pe 4:14)** Do you see what He is saying here? If you are insulted for the name of Christ, if you are reviled for bearing faithfully the name of Christ, for living for Christ, for preaching, teaching, and praying in the name of Christ, it is in reality a blessing because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Your life bears testimony to Christ. Your life bears testimony to His worth and His glory. To use the words of Paul, **in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.** If you are being persecuted for Christ's sake, rejoice because you are reflecting Christ.

Do you see? When the Spirit of glory rests on a believer, something of God's beauty shines forth. Even when we suffer trial because of our faithfulness to Christ something of the Lord is seen in us even if others reject God and us – true of Stephen in Acts 6. That same Spirit who dwells in you so evidently is *the same Spirit* who ministers God's presence to you, who strengthens your faith, who imparts grace and endurance, who rests with refreshing power upon you and causes you to persevere and to glorify God in the midst of trial.

He goes on to say: **(1Pe 4:15-16)** Peter emphasizes the point that he is not speaking of suffering for sinful behavior. Some suffer breaking the law or for obvious and open sin, and some suffer on account of a hidden life of sin; this is no testimony to Christ's worth. Suffering for sin obscures Christ in you; it grieves the Holy Spirit. Hardships and trials resulting from sin are not occasions for rejoicing but for grief, godly sorrow, shame, repentance, restitution, and reformation. Suffering and trial that finds its root in sin is not suffering that brings glory to God, at least not in the sense that Peter is talking about here. True, God's holiness is upheld in the

discipline of sin in His children, but the point of Peter's encouragement is that God is glorified when in the midst of suffering for Christ's sake, we remain holy and faithful, we joyfully endure without sin and show by our joyful faithfulness that Christ is supremely satisfying and worthy of whatever suffering we must endure, unashamedly declaring His preciousness to us.

In this God is glorified, that we do not shrink back from faithfully identifying with Christ in all of our lives, but that in the fire of persecution, the true promise of Christ's presence and good pleasure with us is of more worth than the false promise of acceptance with men if we would just tone our devotion to Christ down a little bit. Glorify God that you are called by the name of Christian – a name that in Peter's day was an insult but which Peter says to wear as a honorable thing.

Oh, beloved, remember the words of Christ: **(Mar 8:34-38)** So, let us therefore say with Paul: **(Php 1:20-21)** Peter's pastoral encouragement is this: when you are the object of scorn, of reproof, of derision, or attack, do not be ashamed, do not shrink back, but instead praise God that you have been counted worthy by God to endure suffering for His name's sake and not because of sin, but because you are faithful. Peter then continues by saying:

3) Judgment has begun at the house of God, but it will not end there. (v.17-18) What does that mean? Peter is saying that it is God's purpose to prepare us for heaven through the sufferings that we endure for the sake of Christ. God uses those trials, though they are not the result of sin, to destroy sin in us. The fire of God burns toward the redeemed and the rebellious in two entirely different ways. Let me explain what I mean.

When the fire of judgment (and this is not judgment in the sense of eternal judgment) burns the church, it is a testing, proving, purifying fire. A good picture of this is in Malachi 3: 1-3. God's judgment of His people is not the judgment of condemnation, but for cleansing. It is the judgment that proves us and reveals us to be the people of God. He is refining for the purpose of revealing. The fiery trial, the fire of God, toward His people, is faithful fire.

But that same fire that purifies His people, consumes His adversaries. Malachi goes on to say in chapter 4: **(Mal 4:1-3)** This is the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God.

When Peter says: "**If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?**" – he is merely arguing from the lesser to the greater. If God uses such severe trials to purge sin from the righteous--if the process of salvation is that difficult--think of how much worse the Day of Judgment will be for the godless and the sinners. If the refining process of a Christian is what it is to prepare Him for heaven, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner – the answer to that is eternal destruction. For that reason, Peter encourages us last to

4) Hold fast to God, entrust yourself to Him who is faithful and continue doing good. (v.19)

Peter is telling us not to lose sight of God's purpose for us and for whatever suffering we may have to endure for Christ. Instead he tells us to entrust ourselves faithfully to God who is a faithful Creator who is bring to fruition and fullness His New Creation – and keep doing good.

Beloved, I am convinced that there is only one way to joyfully entrust yourself to God in the midst of trials and to suffer for Christ and that is if you are convinced that God is worthy and trustworthy -- that God is sovereign and that these sufferings are under his control, that He loves His people with an unshakable and unchanging love, that Christ really is the treasure of all treasures, that eternal life and eternal hope are true and real, and that God will reward those who love His Son and are faithful to Him. It is what was needed for John Huss to give up His life for Christ.

We hear stories like that and we think that we, if given the opportunity, would do the same thing, to die for Christ in a blaze of glory. But would we? We all must come to the place of saying, "I would not forsake Christ and the gospel even if it meant my life." But then quickly we need to realize how being willing to say something like that must bring the rest of our lives into sharp focus.

Can we say: I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I can't find time to sit and read His word each day and spend time communing with Him in prayer. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I can't talk to my neighbor about Him. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I cannot forsake my sin that makes my heart grow cold toward Him. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I cannot forsake the approval of my family and friends. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I don't want people to think our family or our kids are weird. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I cannot forsake my entertainment, etc so that I can give faithfully for His church. I would not forsake Christ no matter the cost, but I don't want to be a fanatic about Him. I would not forsake Christ...or would I?

I pray that we would not. To follow Christ will certainly cost us; will certainly cost you, beloved. There is suffering involved in following Jesus. It must cost us. If your faith in Christ does not cost you, you must question the reality of your faith. True faith costs. It does, but let me encourage you with these words from John Piper in closing: **The degrees of suffering and the forms of affliction will differ for every one of us. But one thing we will all have in common till Jesus comes: we will all die. We will come to that awesome moment of reckoning. If you have time, you will see your whole life played before you as you ponder if it has been well-spent. You will tremble at the unspeakable reality that in just moments you will face God. And the destiny of your soul will be irrevocable. Will you rejoice in that hour? You will if you entrust your soul to a faithful Creator. He created your soul for his glory. He is faithful to that glory**

and to all who love it and live for it. Now is the time to show where your treasure is—in heaven or on earth. Now is the time to shine with the glory of God. Trust him. And keep on rejoicing.

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