

The Fiery Trial, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:12–14

Code: 60-44

INTRODUCTION

A. The Destruction of Rome

On July 19, A.D. 64 during the reign of Emperor Nero the city of Rome was consumed in a holocaust of fire. It was a city of narrow streets and high, wooden tenements that were built close together. The fire spread rapidly and lasted three days and nights. The Roman populace believed that Nero was responsible for burning their great city because he had a strange fixation for building a new city. As the city burned to the ground, he watched gleefully from the Tower of Maecenas. His soldiers not only hindered people who tried to extinguish the fire but also started new fires. The destruction devastated the Roman people because they lost everything: their religious temples, their household gods, their homes, and more. Obviously their resentment was great. Needing to divert the attention away from himself, Nero chose the Christians as his scapegoat. Publicly he blamed them for burning Rome.

It was a crafty choice because Christians were already the innocent victims of hatred and slander. False rumors spread that they ate human flesh and drank blood during Communion and that the holy kiss was in fact unbridled lust. Furthermore, the Romans associated them with the Jewish people. Since hatred for the Jewish people was growing at the time, it was easy to have an anti-Christian attitude as well. The Christian faith was also unpopular because there was tension in the family structure when one spouse became a believer but the other did not.

B. The Persecution of Christians

That initial hatred against the Christians eventually turned into a fixed policy of persecution under various Roman emperors. Honest judges who were prepared to acquit believers of the unfounded charges were overpowered and ignored. Instead, the false charge of anarchy against a civilized society stood against them. As a result, Christians were used as human torches to light Nero's garden parties, sewn inside wild animal skins for hunting dogs to devour, nailed to crosses, and were the objects of other atrocious acts.

Many believers perished in that delirium of savagery. H.B. Workman in his book *Persecution in the Early Church* says, "For two hundred years [from Nero on] the leaders among the Christians were branded as 'anarchists' and 'atheists,' and hated accordingly.... To become a Christian meant the great renunciation, the joining of a despised and persecuted sect, the swimming against the tide of popular prejudice, the coming under the ban of the Empire, the possibility at any moment of imprisonment and death under its most fearful forms.... He that would follow Christ must count the cost, and be prepared to pay the same with his liberty and life.... The mere profession of Christianity was itself a crime. *Christianus sum* [I am a Christian] was almost the one plea for which there was no forgiveness, in itself all that was necessary as a 'title' on the back of the condemned.... For [many] the Name itself ... meant the rack, the blazing shirt of pitch, the lion, the panther, or in the case of maidens an infamy worse than death" ([Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, n.d.], pp. 103-04).

First Peter was probably written just after that persecution began, toward the end of A.D. 64. The believers were experiencing a "fiery ordeal" indeed (1 Pet. 4:12). So the apostle Peter told them how to respond to suffering. In a way it sums up all his previous instruction about that subject.

LESSON

I. EXPECT SUFFERING (v. 12)

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you."

Throughout his letter Peter says that persecution is inevitable. In fact, the surprise would be if it didn't come: the apostle John said, "Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13), Jesus said to His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18), and the apostle Paul said, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

A. It's the Price of Discipleship

To the lost, proclaiming Christ's name is like the unwelcome prick of the conscience because it confronts them with their sin. That confrontation often results in suffering, which is the price of discipleship. Therefore it's necessary to consider the cost of discipleship before deciding to follow Christ. Certainly Jesus had that in mind when He observed that no one builds a tower or goes into battle without first calculating the cost (Luke 14:28-32). Taking up the cross to follow Christ speaks of pain and even death (v. 27).

1. Disciples need the assurance of God's love

"Beloved" (1 Pet. 4:12) is a pastoral term that conveys tenderness, compassion, affection, and care. Both the "sincere love of the brethren" (1:22) and the fervent love covering a multitude of sins (4:8) are expressed in that single word. Such love is a sweet pillow for our weary souls to rest on in the midst of persecution.

Suffering can tempt us to doubt God's love. If someone like Nero rolled our children in pitch and used them as human torches, we might wonder about God's love. In the midst of such persecution the enemy might echo in our ears these vile words once uttered by Job's wife: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). So Peter wrote to assure the believers of his day --and ours--of God's unfailing love.

2. Disciples face many difficulties in life

It shouldn't shock us that life is difficult. When someone takes issue with our testimony, when employees at work are hostile toward us, or when our neighbors have a vendetta against us, it's no surprise since suffering is corollary to the Christian faith. That's because following Christ promises suffering, not immunity from it. Instead of saying Jesus wants us all to be happy, healthy, and wealthy, and will solve all our worldly problems, we need to say truthfully to the ungodly, "You're in desperate need of Jesus Christ because you're on your way to an eternal hell. You have the choice of suffering in hell forever or suffering here for a while as a Christian."

Yet some want to live under the illusion that being a Christian and serving the church eliminates every difficulty. Rather, when God effectively uses us as we're faithful to His Word, we will arouse animosity. In the words of the apostle Paul, "We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

B. It's a Test of Genuine Faith

So we aren't to be amazed about the "fiery ordeal." That Greek term speaks of burning and pictures a furnace that melts down metal to purge it of foreign elements. For example Psalm 66:10 says, "[God] has tried us with fire as silver is tried" (LXX). It's symbolic of affliction, which the Lord designs for our spiritual purity. First Peter 1:6-7 says, "In [the eternal salvation yet to come] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Believers are willing to endure adversity because they know it proves the genuineness of their faith, which will be rewarded at Christ's appearing. So the fiery trial doesn't refer to just any trouble but to

persecution for living the Christian faith.

Suffering for righteousness' sake reveals who's really a true believer. Christ illustrated that point in the parable of the soils: A sower scattered some seed on stony ground, and a plant grew quickly but its roots didn't grow deeply since the soil was shallow. Consequently, under the punishing rays of the sun, the plant died without ever bearing fruit (Matt. 13:5-6).

Our Lord was describing a shallow response to the gospel--not allowing the Word to penetrate the depths of one's heart. Persecution revealed it to be nothing but a superficial profession (vv. 20-21). That's why the persecuted church is the pure church. Through tribulation our Lord purges and cleanses the church of its chaff.

In 1 Peter 4:12 the verb translated "were happening" indicates that this fiery affliction is by God's design, not because of chance. His design is to remove our pride and self-control that we might depend on Him.

II. REJOICE IN SUFFERING (vv. 13-14)

"To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

A. Our Attitude

"Keep on rejoicing" indicates the attitude we're to have in the midst of trials. Anything the world brings against us for the sake of righteousness is cause for rejoicing. Jesus emphasized that by saying, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10-12).

B. Our Motivation

1. The sufferings of Christ (v. 13a)

"To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ [now]."

In suffering for what is right we are partners in the same kind of sufferings Jesus endured. Jesus Christ endured earthly sufferings at the hands of sinners because He was without sin. So we aren't to be perplexed or discouraged when it's our privilege to share in the same kind of sufferings He experienced.

2. The return of Christ (v. 13b)

"To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation."

"The revelation of His glory" is "the day that the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:30) and refers to Christ's second coming. Christ received that glory when He ascended to heaven, but it hasn't been revealed yet on earth for man to see. However, His glory in His second coming will be so great that everyone will see it (Matt. 24:30).

When He returns, believers will "rejoice with exultation." Peter twice uses the term "rejoice" (Gk., *chairo*) in this verse but the second time it's qualified by "exultation" (Gk., *agallomai*), a reference to rapturous joy. The sense of the verse is, "Keep on being happy, for if you do so, some day you'll be ecstatic!" If we're faithful to Christ by sharing in His sufferings in this life, we'll experience a joy that surpasses all others when He returns.

"To the degree" indicates that our eternal reward is a direct reflection of our earthly suffering. That's because suffering reveals our faithfulness to Christ. Jesus Himself pointed out the relation between the two in saying, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23).

3. The name of Christ (v. 14)

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

a) It's the cause of reproach "Reviled" means "to heap insults upon." In the Old Testament and Septuagint it speaks of reproach heaped on God and His people by the ungodly, and in the New Testament it refers to indignities and mistreatments against Christ--the things that He endured at the hands of sinners. Since His name sums up all that He is, "for the name of Christ" indicates we represent all that He is. It also implies we're publicly proclaiming His name, which is what causes the hostility. So the verse is speaking of those who are reviled for proclaiming the name of Christ. In the days of the early church, the lost would exclaim with exasperation, "Christians are always talking about that name!" (cf. Acts 4:17-18; 17:6). And if we identify with the name of Jesus Christ and tell others about Him, we'll be reproached and insulted, just as our brothers and sisters in the early church were. "Name" became synonymous with Christ Himself. In Acts 5:41 the apostles "went on their way from the presence of the [Sanhedrin], rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name." Peter said, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (4:12). When the Lord confronted the apostle Paul on the Damascus Road He said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" in proclaiming the good news to the lost (9:16). Acts 15:26 says, "Men ... risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." b) It's the source of blessing "Blessed" (1 Pet. 4:14) means "fortunate." As we just observed, we'll gain an eternal weight of glory for the privilege of sharing Christ's sufferings (cf. Luke 6:22-23). We're also fortunate because "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon [us]" (v. 14). That's a reference to the objective presence and power of the Holy Spirit, not our subjective happiness. 1) Because of the Spirit's presence "Glory" refers to the Spirit's essential attribute. To many of the Jewish believers in the early church, it would be a reminder of the Shekinah, a symbol of God's presence. At the inauguration of the Tabernacle and Temple, "the glory of the Lord [His presence or Shekinah] filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:11). So we are privileged to have God's presence with us when we suffer for Christ: we become like Moses, whose face was shining with the glory of God (Ex. 33:29), or like the Tabernacle, so laden with God's glory "that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud" (1 Kings 8:11). 2) Because of the Spirit's power As the Shekinah rested in the Tabernacle and the Temple, so long ago the Spirit in His glorious splendor and power rested upon suffering Christians. "Rests" (1 Pet. 4:14) speaks of refreshment in the sense of taking over for us as the dominant power in the midst of our suffering. That rest came upon Stephen, a deacon in the Jerusalem church. As he stood before the Sanhedrin to give a defense for his faith, the religious leaders "saw his face like the face of an angel," signifying serenity, tranquility, and a gentle joy unaffected by hostility (Acts 6:15). The leaders became infuriated as Stephen explained the Scriptures to them, but Stephen unaffected by it all, "gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (7:55-56). The Spirit took control of his life, allowing him the matchless privilege of seeing Christ in His glory, and he became oblivious to all else. As his enemies stoned him to death, "he called upon the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'.... Do not hold this sin against them! And having said this, he fell asleep" (7:59-60). If you read Foxe's Book of Martyrs it's natural to wonder, How could those martyred Christians transcend such enormous physical pain? How could they be singing hymns and praising God? How could they forgive their tormentors? The answer is they saw the richness of sharing Christ's sufferings, they knew their suffering issued an eternal weight of glory, and the Spirit of glory rested upon them, taking them beyond the physical realm.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why did Nero blame the Christians for burning Rome?

2. Describe the kind of persecution believers experienced as a result.
3. How does the writing of 1 Peter relate to the Roman persecution?
4. How did Peter assure believers that they were loved (1 Pet. 4:12)?
5. How does God effectively use us in trials (2 Cor. 2:15-16)?
6. What is the spiritual benefit of a "fiery ordeal" (1 Pet. 4:12)?
7. What lesson did Christ teach in the parable about the stony soil (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21)?
8. How should the sufferings of Christ motivate you to rejoice while enduring trials (1 Pet. 4:13)?
9. What is the reason the believer will "rejoice with exultation" at Christ's second coming (1 Pet. 4:13)?
10. Suffering reveals our to Christ.
11. In what specific way is the name of Christ the cause for reproach (1 Pet. 4:14)?
12. In 1 Peter 4:13 "name" is synonymous with . Support your answer with Scripture.
13. Whose presence supports us during trials (1 Pet. 4:14)?
14. Explain how the Holy Spirit's power rested upon Stephen (Acts 6:15; 7:55-56, 59-60).

Pondering the Principles

1. The Spirit controlled Stephen's life so that he was occupied with Christ, not his adversity (Acts 6:15; 7:55-56, 59-60). Author Jerry Bridges wrote, "The Christian life is intended to be one of continuous growth. We all want to grow, but we often resist the process. This is because we tend to focus on the events of adversity themselves, rather than looking with the eye of faith beyond the events to what God is doing in our lives. It was said of Jesus that He 'for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame' (Hebrews 12:2). Christ's death on the cross with its intense physical agony and infinite spiritual suffering of bearing God's wrath for our sins was the greatest calamity to ever come upon a human being. Yet Jesus could look beyond that suffering to the joy set before Him.... We are to look beyond our adversity to what God is doing in our lives and rejoice in the certainty that He is at work in us to cause us to grow" (Trusting God [Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988], p. 175). When you suffer for righteousness' sake, be encouraged to know that "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Pet. 4:14). Like Moses, you can endure, "seeing Him who is unseen" (Heb. 11:27).
2. The apostle Paul said, "[Our] momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The Puritan Thomas Watson gave a similar encouragement for persevering in trials: "You are within a few days' march of heaven. Salvation is near to you.... Christians, it is but a while and you will have done weeping and praying, and be triumphing; you shall put off your mourning, and put on white robes; you shall put off your armour, and put on a victorious crown. You who have made a good progress in religion, you are almost ready to commence and take your degree of glory; now is your salvation nearer than when you began to believe.... Though the way be up-hill and full of thorns, yet you have gone the greatest part of your way, and shortly shall rest from your labours" (A Body of Divinity [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986], p. 286). To help you persevere in trials, "look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

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