

# The Fiery Trial and the Faithfulness of God

## 1 Peter 4:12-19

There are different ways to suffer.

- You could be a Detroit Lions football fan.
- You could hit your thumb with a hammer.
- You could go through a painful breakup.
- You could break the law and suffer the consequences.
- You could take a dare from your friends and eat something that makes you sick.
- You could have a sickness.
- You could have to work multiple jobs; or you could have lost your job.
- You could have lose someone close to you.

There are many ways to suffer.

“Innumerable are the ills which beset human life.” — Calvin

That’s a real uplifting introduction isn’t it?

This passage is about a distinct kind of suffering: suffering for following Jesus.

- Some suffering can be placed into the **broken world category** – we suffer from sickness, death, weather-related disasters because of sin.
  - “**Normal suffering**”
- Others can be put into the **mysterious category**: like the unimaginable suffering of Job.
  - “**Abnormal suffering**”
- Some suffering is the **result of our sin against God and others**.
  - “**Just suffering**”
- But a fourth category is suffering **because you’re following Jesus**.
  - “**Suffering for righteousness sake**”

Throughout Peter’s first epistle, he has described various aspects of Christian suffering (see 1 Peter 3.13-14; 18; 2:20-21; 4:1ff).

- Here he touches on six truths.
- These truths restate what has been taught about suffering, with some expanded instructions.
  1. Don’t be surprised by fiery trials.
  2. Rejoice that you are united to Christ.
  3. Don’t suffer for doing evil.
  4. Don’t be ashamed to suffer for Christ’s name.
  5. Remember that God uses suffering to purify his church.
  6. Entrust your soul to your Faithful Creator.

I think one of the problems with our context is that we may read this and think, “How does this apply to us?” We’re not facing persecution, right?

- Well, it’s important to understand that the physical persecution from Nero hadn’t happened yet.
- At this point, the Christians were suffering because of what they would not do.

- They wouldn't participate in the sins and the idolatry that had been normalized in the Roman way of life.
- Consequently, they faced mockery, slander, and the word in our text: **insults**. (V. 14; 3:16)

Therefore, I would submit that we really can relate to this text.

- When you don't go along with the crowd (1 Pet 4:4) it may surprise some, it may provoke questions from others, and it may anger others.
- You very well may be insulted for following Jesus today.
- You may not be assaulted for following Jesus; but you may very well be insulted for following Jesus.
- Suffering for righteousness can look like a lot of differing things:
  - Not being promoted because of your integrity.
  - Being mocked at work or school because you won't sin with others.
  - Be shamed because of your view of marriage or you view of life from womb to tomb.
  - Being shunned in the academy because you believe in the creation account; or because you believe in sin, judgment, the exclusivity of Christ, or hell.
  - Being insulted by family members because you have become a follower of Jesus.
    - This is particularly real for those who are converted out of other religions.
- What's more, there's no guarantee of what the future will be in regard to the state and freedom of religion; so we better understand texts like this.
- If the choice is offend God or offend people by holding on to truth; then we offend people for the sake of truth, knowing that it's the truth that will actually set them free.
- Our goal is not popularity but faithfulness.
- Students, be ready to enter the world where people won't like you because of your faith.
- Resolve right now, to follow Jesus.
- Resolve now, that it's better to suffer than to sin.

Richard Wurmbrand (founder of VOM, 14 yrs in Romanian prison) on suffering: "I remember my last confirmation class before I left Romania. I took a group of ten to fifteen boys and girls on a Sunday morning, not to church, but to the zoo. Before the cage of lions I told them, 'Your forefathers in faith were thrown before such wild beasts for their faith. Know that you also will have to suffer. You will not be thrown before lions, but you will have to do with men who would be much worse than lions. Decide here and now if you wish to pledge allegiance to Christ.' They had tears in their eyes when they said yes."

What do we need to know as we prepare for insults or mistreatment for following Jesus?

- Peter writes here not only under the inspiration of the Spirit but as one who knew from personal experience what denying Christ was like (as he was bowled over by a little girl at the crucifixion), and what persecution was like (seen throughout Acts).

6 truths:

## #1: Don't be surprised by fiery trials (4:12)

Unbelievers are “surprised” when Christians don't join them in sinful behavior. (4:4)  
Christians shouldn't be surprised that opposition against them for following Jesus.

Further, there's something happening beyond the opposition we may face: God is “testing us,” refining us.

- This is the language of 1 Pet 1:6-7 (cf., Ps 66:10-12)
- It's not random suffering but purposeful, and we should therefore not be surprised.
- God is sovereign over the suffering; and uses it for our refining.
- We often think God is only working when we're experiencing comfort and ease and prosperity; but God is working in the hard times as well.
- He refines us in suffering.

This kind of advanced warning is for our good.

- I appreciate when a pilot lets us know of turbulence to come. I don't like the turbulence, but I'm not shocked by it.
- **Schreiner:** “If they were astonished at the suffering that occurred, they may have been overwhelmed, concluding that God did not love them. An advance warning of suffering helps the readers to be prepared for suffering, so that their faith is not threatened when difficulties arise.”

Some professions are inherently dangerous. They are prepared for trials.

- **Football players shouldn't be surprised by the hits of the opponents.**
  - They don't say, “Hey, pal, stop touching me.”
- **Parents aren't surprised that their kids don't always listen!**
  - They may be quite surprised when they do!
- **Cooks aren't surprised when they occasionally burn themselves**
  - If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen
- **Pastors shouldn't be surprised by criticism.**
  - You need the heart of a child and the hide of a rhinoceros
- **Couples shouldn't be surprised by conflict, but they should prepare for it.**

Christians shouldn't be surprised by suffering; after all we follow the one who suffered.

- But as we follow the suffering servant, we will also follow him into glory.
- For the slain lamb is now standing; and we will follow the lamb into new creation.

## #2: Rejoice that you are united to Christ (4:13-14)

**A.** Instead of shock at suffering, our response should be “rejoicing.”

- We can rejoice when we face resentment because we're sharing in the sufferings of Christ.
- The hostility that Christ faced will come our way; for we are united to him.
  - **Put a note in a book, the note goes with the book.**
  - What's true of Christ is true of us.
  - Suffering doesn't sound a lot that good, but we share in his glory too!

- “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9; 22). He was persecuting the church, but the church in united to Christ.

The idea of experiencing joy when suffering for Christ’s name is powerfully illustrated in **Acts 5:41**: “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

- It’s almost like they were relieved.... Great things were happening but they hadn’t suffered yet, though it was promised... but then they were good and flogged... and they smile because they’ve been counted worthy to suffer for the name.
- Go about doing good; do God’s will; commend Christ to others, and you will be opposed and you will be filled with joy.
  - In the most vivid story of suffering for righteousness and of going through the fire is the story of the three men in **Daniel 3** — literally thrown into the fire, and the people see a mysterious person with them...
  - Jesus is with us in the fire... he went through his own fiery trial and triumphed!

**B.** The goal of this rejoicing is underscored: “that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (4:13)

- An echo of Matt 5:11: **Spurgeon who received harsh criticism for his theology had the verse, “Blessed are you when other revile you” hanging over his bed.**
- This is a lot of joy: rejoice and be glad! It’s an overflow of joy.
- **When you suffer now for following Jesus, it’s an indication that you will rejoice in the future.**
- How you respond to this kind of suffering shows whether or not you belong to Jesus.
- When you suffer faithfully and joyfully, it brings a certain assurance that you will most certainly rejoice in the future.
- This future glory energizes our lives now.
- Church in Smyrna: **Revelation 2:9–11**: ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil [behind persecution] is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’

**C.** An additional reason to endure suffering faithfully: “the Spirit of the glory of Christ rests on you” (4:14)

- When you suffer for the name of Christ you are “blessed” and the Spirit of God’s glory “rests on you”
- He may be alluding to **Isaiah 11:2**.
  - **Isaiah 11:2**: “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.”
  - **The same Spirit of God predicted to rest upon the Messiah also rests on the believer who is willing to suffer for Christ (Jobes)**

- Peter is describing a remarkable experience.
  - I take it to mean that during a moment of persecution, the presence of the Spirit gives you (1) an unusual nearness to Christ; (2) He gives you power to endure; and (3) an unspeakable foretaste of glory to come.
- Recall Paul speaking of sharing in the fellowship of Christ's suffering; it's a way in which we experience a certain nearness of Christ and his power and beauty.
- It's like Stephen who was martyred, as the Spirit of God's glory rested upon him he sees Jesus standing!

### #3: Don't suffer for the wrong reasons (4:15)

We again appreciate Peter's realism here.

- Even in the early church there was sin!
- So they needed exhortations to forgive each other (4:8); and they needed exhortations to godly living.

You experience a well-deserved suffering when you sin.

- Avoid that!
- Those who "steal" and "murder" deserve punishment, as these are not only sins but crimes in society.
- Those you are "evil doers" also need correction and discipline.

But it's interesting that he also includes "meddling" in the same verse.

- Because it's unusual to add this to the list, it may be his real concern.
- The word appears here for the first time in Greek literature.
- It may have been coined by Peter.
- The word (allotriepiskopos) comes from two root words: allotrios ("belonging to another") and episkopos ("overseer").
- The meaning is something like one who meddles in things that do not concern him or her, or one who interferes in someone else's business.
  - Trying to pastor someone else's business.
  - Pastoring where you don't belong.
  - If that were a problem in the first century, imagine what Peter would say about those who do this on social media for hours.
- As Christians in the Roman culture, they may have been tempted to cross cultural limits, like interfering in family affairs, or with excessive zeal, attacking pagan habits.
- So avoid annoying others.
- Don't be an argumentative person, ranting about everything.
- Don't be pests or busybodies.
- Suffer for righteousness, not for self-righteousness.
- Suffering for Jesus and suffering for being a jerk aren't the same thing!!!
- Schreiner: "Peter wanted believers to refrain from acting tactlessly and without social graces."

### #4: Don't be ashamed to suffer as a Christian (4:16)

On the other hand, they shouldn't be ashamed with being labeled a "Christian."  
This is suffering for the right reason.

The term *Christian* only occurs here and in Acts 11:26; 26:28.

- Followers of Jesus were first called "Followers of the way" "disciples" or "believers"
- The name was first given to the Christians in Antioch, as people distinguished them from the Jews and from unbelieving Gentiles.
- The word means "followers of Christs." "Little Christs."

Glorify God in that name.

- Today people are okay with a certain vague God-talk.
- But they don't want the name of Jesus mentioned; they don't want you to pray in Jesus name.
- Don't be ashamed when you have the opportunity to speak in his name.

What does it mean to "not be ashamed"?

- We shame Christ when we deny Christ before others, or when we fail to persevere.
- We glorify Christ when we follow him in the face of opposition *joyfully*.
- Because as we do, we are showing that Christ is more valuable to us than anything.
- You will suffer for what you love; and when you suffer for what you love, you glorify the thing you love.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. The old saint was arrested and brought into the arena ... the proconsul urged him to offer incense to Caesar. 'Take the oath,' said the proconsul, 'and I shall release you. Curse Christ.' Polycarp famously replied, 'Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' Tied to the stake, Polycarp prayed to be received by the Lord 'as a rich and acceptable sacrifice'. (Clowney)

- **Acts 21:13**: "For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."
- Because our Savior is more valuable than the approval of others; than the comforts of this world, we joyfully endure the fiery trials to his glory.
- When all other pleasures are stripped away, we still rejoice because our Christ satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts.
- And that kind of joy in him glorifies him.

You may be insulted for following Jesus; rejoice and be glad and glorify God in that name, as you persevere faithfully.

**#5: Remember that God uses suffering to purify his church (4:17-18)**

**17:** The word "For" is probably looking back to the whole passage 4:12-16 and picks up the initial idea of fiery trial in verse 12. (Malachi 3:1-5)



This “judgment” is the final judgement that actually takes place now in this present evil age.

- For believers, it is not a punitive judgment, but a purifying judgement.
- There’s no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.
- But God sanctifies his people through the refining fires of opposition.
- God’s goal for us is not comfort, but Christ-likeness.
- “It is God’s nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything” (Martin Luther)

Jesus will have a church that will be without spot or wrinkle.

He purifies his bride.

**17b-18:** Peter then uses a lesser to the greater argument in verse 18 to describe a greater kind of punishment that will come for unbelievers. (cf., **Prov 11:31**)

- If those who will be saved are purified and judged now, then surely the result of those who reject and disbelieve Christ will experience even greater suffering later (Storms)
- **For the Christian, this is as bad as it will be – so endure it in view of glory.**
- For the non-Christian, a worse kind of suffering awaits them. (cf., Mal 3:1-5)
  - See this as a grace if you’re not a Christian.
  - This is a warning so that you would turn to Christ and be united to him and experience glory instead of terrifying judgment.
  - Don’t disobey the gospel of God but obey it by repenting and following Jesus.

“**scarcely**” doesn’t mean that God is not really happy about saving us.

- It’s more like Jesus’ idea of the narrow gate and persevering; the difficulty of following Jesus.
- As we enter this gate, don’t be surprised by trials along the path to glory, and remember that he is purifying us through it all.
- “With many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God” (**Acts 14:22**)

#### **#6: Entrust your soul to your faithful Creator (4:19)**

Peter says “if you suffer according to God’s will” implying that this kind of fiery trial is designed by God for our good.

We very well may suffer for “doing good.”

In this kind of holy suffering, what are we to do?

- “Entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator.”
  - Entrust means to hand over something of value to the care of someone else.
  - Entrust your valuable life to the one who gave you life.
  - He is entirely trustworthy.

An echo of Psalm 31:5 (quoted by Jesus at the cross, Lk 23:46).

- This picks up the line about Christ’s example in **1 Pet 2:23**.

- Jesus has shown us how to suffer, as he trusted in the Father.

By calling God “**Creator**” Peter is emphasizing God’s total sovereignty over the lives of his people and everything we may face.

“**faithful**” God is faithful to his promises.

- He will raise us in glory and we will be with our Christ.
- He will never leave us nor forsake us.
- He is working all things together for our good and his glory.
- He never wastes these trials, but uses them to make us more like Jesus.

So trust him. Every other source of trust is a false security.

- Psalm 22, “In you our fathers trusted” (v. 4).
- Jesus trusted the Father as he gave up his life for us.

*The other gods were strong, but thou was weak,  
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne.  
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone. (Jesus of the Scars)*

Only Jesus.

- Every book of the Bible speaks of suffering, and towering over all of it, is the Man of sorrows, acquainted with Grief.
- He knows suffering.
- He’s with us in suffering.
- He will see to it that in him we will share in resurrection glory.

*1 How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!  
What more can he say than to you he has said,  
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

*4 "When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
my grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply;  
the flame shall not hurt you; I only design  
your dross to consume and your gold to refine.*

*6 "The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake."*

The fiery trial on earth ... suffering for Christ’s name....

- Never be surprised by it.



- **Never be ashamed of it.**
- **Never be confused about it**
- **Glorify God in it as you trust Him in the midst of it.**