

First Peter: The Fiery Ordeal

1 Peter 4:12-19

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We are continuing in the book of ethics for exiles, first Peter, our text being the NT lesson. To this point, suffering has been mentioned a good deal. And it was a live possibility, and probably some sort of low-level reality on the ground, for these Christians.

But now, the mood changes. Now suffering is an urgent reality, a fiery ordeal. And so, Peter addresses it, yet again, at length. We will make two points. Participation in verses 12-16, and Purification in verses 17-19. First, then, Participation.

I. Participation

You can tell this is a new section, for Peter greets them again – saying, Dear friends. Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which has come upon you to test you. Whatever is happening now, it is not “if you should suffer for the good.” It is a fiery reality. And the church should not be surprised at this. Jesus made this clear. No servant is above his master. If they hated me, they will hate you. In this world, you will have trouble. But, take courage: I have overcome the world. And Peter himself has already told us to expect slander and vilification. He has said: since Christ suffered in the flesh – arm yourselves for the same purpose.

We ourselves seem to be descending into some sort of national, cultural fiery ordeal. But its not new. It’s a fire that has burned much more intensely across the centuries. And is burning now across huge swaths of the globe, where Christians suffer and are killed at alarming rates. So, don’t be surprised. The furnace, the fiery ordeal, has come upon you, Peter says, to test you. Remember, he opened this letter by saying: that we rejoice in our unfading, undefiled, imperishable inheritance in heaven – even though now, for a little while, we are grieved by various trials.

These trials, Peter said, test the genuineness of our faith. Faith that is more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire. The fire comes – again this is in the opening paragraph of the book – the fire comes, so that our faith may result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation (apocalypse) of

Jesus Christ. Which is a reference to Christ openly honoring and bestowing glory on the saints, at his second coming.

So, the fiery ordeal here is the same sifting fire of chapter 1. It comes to test, and we should not think that this is abnormal, that something strange is happening to us. After the fall, and before the eschaton, suffering – of one form or another – grips the whole created order. We resist it, we long for its end, rightfully. For we groan, by the Spirit, for the day when:

“He will wipe every tear. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

So, we are not to be surprised, or to think suffering strange, but instead – and this is startling, even incomprehensible: But, rather, rejoice! Rejoice, inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ. Suffering can either harden a person, or it can crack them open, for new beauty to flower forth. The unjust sufferings of the church, draw it into the very mystery of Christ’s own sufferings.

This is an astonishing thing, and how it happens, we can’t really say. Other than, by the mystery of the Spirit, Christ, who suffered once and for all, draws us into, makes us partakers of, his own suffering. (Christian victory looks like in this age) We share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, Paul says. Somehow, we must learn to see our unjust hardships as a participation in the cross of Jesus. His suffering, if you will, normalizes and dignifies our suffering. And because this is so: we rejoice – or we are called to rejoice – in the fiery ordeal.

In chapter 3, Peter said: if you suffer for righteousness, you will be blessed. Here he is just following his Lord who said: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

This is our joy IN suffering with Jesus. The joy of the kingdom is, and shall be, ours. We rejoice in this suffering with Christ, Peter continues, so that we may be OVERjoyed, when his glory is revealed. Joy in suffering now, OVER-joyed, superabundant joy, at the revealing of Christ in the full splendor of his glory.

This revelation of Christ in glory refers to his coming at the end of the age. Peter has already said that our faith will result in glory, AT the revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul, in Colossians tells us: We have died, and our life is now hidden with Christ in God. (in heaven, where Christ is) ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Here we see the conjunction, unbreakable in the NT. Suffering then glory. Suffering characterizes this age. Glory speaks of the age to come. ¹¹ *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. Blessedness now (in suffering), and a great reward in heaven (in*

glory). Paul puts it this way in marvelous passage from 2 Cor 4: ¹⁷ *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*

But suffering does not produce glory automatically. It does it, Paul says: ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

So, v.14: If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, the glorious name which we are honored to bear, if you are insulted because of that name, you are blessed. And why are we blessed in suffering for the name? Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us. The Spirit, the bearer of the radiant glory of the age to come, already rests (hovers, cloud-like) on the suffering church.

The same Spirit which rested on the Messiah, as we saw in the OT lesson from Isaiah 11. The Spirit which descended on Jesus at his baptism. This – and no other reason -- is why the church is blessed in affliction. She is blessed because – drawn into the mystery of Christ's passion – she already, through the Spirit, tastes the glory to come. She is not blessed because her suffering is going to bear any particular short-term social or political or cultural fruit. Often quite the opposite happens. The church is trampled in her outward estate. She is blessed because suffering – rightly embraced, by looking to the eternal invisible glory – produces, and stores up, eschatological glory for the saints.

Of course, we are not to suffer for doing evil, but if we suffer as a Christian, we are not to be ashamed, but praise God that we bear that name. The name Christian, which belongs to those who confess the name of Christ. To suffer in that name, is no cause for shame, it is the cause of glory. That's participation.

II. Purification

Our second point is purification. Here Peter gives what appears to be a strange, mysterious reason for rejoicing in suffering. We might call it an eschatological reason. It is time, Peter says in v.17. This is not the standard word for chronological time. This word means an appointed time, a divine event. We have already been told in chapter 1, that Jesus has been revealed in the last times. And that we are being kept for the coming salvation which is ready to be revealed in the last time. And that the end of all things is at hand.

And now we are told – that it is time for judgment – the judgment – to begin with God's household. The judgment at the end of the age, the great white throne judgment Day – is already beginning in the life of the church. The prophets – Malachi and Zechariah for example – speak of a coming fiery, purging sifting, testing, judgment, to come on the people of God, at the end of the age.

The fiery ordeal Peter speaks of, is not a mere season of suffering that will pass, and everything will go back to normal. It is the judgment of God – in the form of pagan hostility. It is the fire of the Day of God, the burning fire of the last judgment, to purify the elect for glory. Judgment begins, these same prophets taught, with the household of God. And it is ALREADY time for that judgment to begin. This is the great tribulation, which is the history of the church, and through which, we must enter the kingdom of God. And if it begins with us, which it does, and the church itself will be saved as through fire, which it will, then, he asks: what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Then he cites Proverbs 11 from the Greek OT. “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Ahhh. There’s Peter the optimist again. I kid. He’s an eschatological optimist. As far history goes, it’s a fiery furnace. That is why our hope is to be COMPLETELY fixed on the coming revelation of Christ in glory.

Notice what Peter assumes and teaches here. It is hard for the righteous to be saved! This is, of course, something Christians in hostile cultures, something the martyrs have always understood. Something Christians in large swaths of the world today understand. The church is saved – and here we mean final, future salvation - the church is saved through a purifying, consuming, testing fire which began in the first century, and which continues to today. And the bleeding edge, the face of that fire, is unjust suffering and persecution. Through Many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God, Jesus said. He knows it is hard for the righteous to be saved. For he said: *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.* ¹⁴ *For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Few find life, many find destruction. And when asked, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” He said to them, (evoking the narrow and wide gates) ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” Pretty clear answer. Oh – he said this too: Many are called, few are chosen. How could that be any clearer? Many are called – outwardly by the preaching of the gospel – but few are chosen and respond to the Word.

In Luke 18, in the parable of the persistent widow, pleading with the unjust judge, Jesus recognized that justice, long delayed in history, comes swiftly at his appearing. But because justice is deferred, he asks: Will the son of man find faith on earth when he comes? In the context of the parable, the answer is: It’s not totally clear. Jesus is asking the question precisely because its deeply relevant: It is HARD for the righteous to endure unto future, eschatological salvation.

And if that is the case, if this fire will burn up all the chaff, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Well, if its hard for the just, its going to be impossible for those who reject the gospel of grace. They will not stand in the great day. For

them, this same fire which purifies the elect remnant, is a fire that consumes. Paul puts it this way in 2 Thess. 1: There is a coming day, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Now, to be clear. It is not suffering in itself that saves. It is the gospel of God. But that gospel, if embraced with saving faith, leads the church into a cauldron. Into a fiery ordeal. It brings the fire of the coming judgment on the church. And it is only by the gospel, by union with the sufferings of Christ, that the righteous are saved in the day of judgment. Suffering then glory. So, we participate in the sufferings of Christ, and by so doing, we are purified for glory. There is no glory for us that is not along this road of participation in Christ's affliction, and through this fire of holy purification.

So then, v.19 concludes: those who suffer according to God's will, should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. Peter said of the suffering, wounded, non-retaliating, battered Jesus: that as he suffered, he kept entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Here we are called to the same: commit yourself, keep entrusting yourself, to God the just judge. For we know whom we have believed, and we are convinced, that he is able to guard, what we have entrusted to him, until the Day of God.

Notice who we commit ourselves to here: our faithful Creator. Peter calls God the Creator here because he is alluding to his role as the universal judge of all humanity. To his prerogatives over his creation. So, commit yourselves to your faithful Creator, and – Peter concludes: continue to do good. Continue to do the thing that is causing the pain. Provoking the suffering. Don't shrink back, doing good to all, honoring all, is at the heart of your calling. Wait, Peter says, for him who judges justly, for he who vindicated Jesus in the resurrection, will vindicate the church at the resurrection.

So, now we rejoice because we have been given the dignity, the high honor, of participating in Christ's own suffering. This is the judgment of God beginning at the house of God, the purifying fire, the fiery ordeal. It is hard for the righteous to be saved. But when we come through this fire, we will be overjoyed for Christ's glory will be revealed. And you too will be revealed with him in glory. Calibrate your hope accordingly. Glory be to God. Amen.

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