

In the Face of Persecution

The Apostle Peter, who if you'll remember was the one who swore to faithfully stand with Jesus—even after Jesus told him that he would deny him—was charged with ministering to the Jews, wrote 1 Peter to those who were dispersed throughout Asia Minor. He is often referred to as the “Apostle of Hope.” The Christian Jews in Asia, around 65 A.D., were being abused by overbearing bosses (2:18), threatened by unbelieving spouses (3:1, 6), and ridiculed by skeptical neighbors and associates (4:14). On the horizon loomed the possibility of a much more violent form of persecution (4:12–18).

It was a very anti-Christian society. See any similarities to some of the persecution examples I spoke about this morning? The questions raised by Peter for these believers are, I believe, the same that we should pose for ourselves today:

- How can we have the power of soul in times of great stress and anxiety not just to endure the evil day, but to be joyful and to fill our lives with the *fruits of righteousness* as Paul described in Philippians 1:11, with deeds of kindness, with projects of mercy, with labors of love?
- How, when your life is falling apart, or your job, your marriage, or your health is in jeopardy—how can you rise up with joy and bless those who abuse and persecute you and devote yourself to labors of love for God's glory?

To show God's love simply for love's sake requires discipline in the very best of circumstances. But to give yourself in love to others when your own life is falling apart, that takes a power greater than us. If that is what we are called to do as Christians, then the power has to come from some source greater than ourselves. If you will, turn to 1 Peter 4:12–19.

As we read, note that three different times in this text, Peter refers to Christians as exiles, sojourners, or refugees in this world; much the way Paul did in Philippians 3:20 when he wrote; “*Our citizenship is in heaven...*”, which should point out to us that our Christian existence is lived away from home. And the lesson these days is that we, as Christ's bride (the church), have become way too accustomed to living “at home” here in America, and around the world. So that's the backdrop of Peter's words now in 4:12–19;

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake in Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now; ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear? Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.’”

I want us to look at this text twice. First, let’s look at what Peter tells us what persecution we should expect to face as Christians. What happens to the exiles, the sojourners, and refugees in this world? Next, I want us to focus on how Christians who believe the gospel of God and who have the hope of seeing and rejoicing in the glory of Christ at His second coming (as he says in verse 13) — how should Christians respond to the fiery trials that come their way.

Peter describes what’s coming in six ways. And he also describes how we should respond in six ways.

So What’s Coming? What Should We As Christians Expect?

1. In verse 12, he tells us that “Fiery Trials” are coming.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;”

So what are these “Fiery Trials” that Peter refers to? I think the answer lies in Chapter 1:6-7; *“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

So here we have “fiery trials” and instead of referring to one terrible thing, verse 6 describes them as “various trials”—in other words, all kinds of trials.

In reading the entirety of 1 Peter, some of the examples he gives of these “Fiery Trials” range from beatings to verbal abuse. In 2:20, he asks; “***For what credit is it if, when beaten for your faults, you take it patiently...***” Then in verse 21, he discusses the vicarious suffering of Christ when he writes; “***For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us as example that you should follow in His steps:***” Why should we as followers of Christ expect not to face the same trials and persecution? Also, in 1 Peter 3:9, we read of the trial of being reviled by others; and we are instructed to “***not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.***” Other examples include being slandered, or put down for not acting the way you did before your salvation. I’m here to tell you that if you weren’t changed by your salvation—if you still act the way you acted before you were saved; if you still do the things you did before you were saved—then brothers and sisters, I encourage you to really reexamine your heart and make sure you were saved in the first place. We all sin; we all fall short of God’s glory because we are a fallen people, but if you cheat, drink, lie, run down others to build yourself up, or talk about someone behind their back—and you don’t feel remorse in your heart the second you do it—then folks, I’m worried about your soul.

So I encourage you not to interpret the fiery trials of 4:12 too narrowly. The trials of 1 Peter include being beaten, being reviled, being slandered, and being maligned — and the sufferings of Christ stand before those believers as a summary of what should be expected. When these kinds of things happen to you as Christians, don’t be surprised. God’s Word tells us to expect this.

Something I ask you to consider is this; God planned that the sufferings of Jesus Christ saved us from the sufferings of punishment for sin, not the sufferings of purification of our souls. They save us from the fires of hell, not from the fires of refining. As I stated earlier, we see in 1 Peter 1:6-7, we were told that, far from being strange and surprising in God’s plan, these fiery trials are necessary so that the tested genuineness of your faith; “... ***may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.***”

In Acts 14:22, where Luke wrote about appointing elders in every church, he exhorted them by stating; “... ***We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.***”; this is another way of stating that we must face fiery trials to purify ourselves to, and for, our God.

2. In 1 Peter 4:13, we are told to “... ***partake in Christ’s sufferings***...” I interpret “Christ’s sufferings” as the sort of things Jesus endured while on this earth, and we should endure those same things for His sake. Am I suggesting we be crucified on a cross? NO But should we crucify our SELF for God’s glory? YOU BETCHA!!
3. In verse 14, being reproached, or insulted, is another type of a fiery trial: “***If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you...***”
4. In verse 16, it’s called suffering as a Christian: “***Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.***”
5. Verse 17 calls it judgment — God’s judgment: “***For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God;...***” This fits with 1 Peter 1:6–7 because the fires of suffering now refine us so that we will shine like gold at the last judgment. Who here wants to hear the words; “*Well done my good and faithful servant*” on that day?
6. And finally in verse 19, the fiery trial is explained as suffering according to the will of God; “***Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.***”

So how did Peter tell us what we should expect in the “Fiery Trials”?

- We should expect to face them as Christians (verse 12). So don’t be surprised when they come.
- We should expect to share in, to face, the same sufferings as Christ (verse 13),
- We should expect to be insulted for his name (verse 14), for being a Christian
- We should expect to suffer as a Christian (verse 16) so that our suffering might glorify the Father
- We must accept that we will be refined by fire as Christians, in a divine act of purifying our souls,
- And lastly, we will suffer according to God’s will so we might glorify Him (verse 19)

Please don't think these "Fiery Trials" as punishment, for they are of this world and Our God in Heaven will take these and turn them; He will bless them, and return them to us in a blessed life if we will only allow Him to do so through our faith.

Don't be surprised when these trials find their ways into your life. They are an opportunity for you to grow in Christ by demonstrating that we are indeed "Citizens of Heaven", only residing in this world until our Savior returns to call us home.

Next, let's look at the six responses that Peter calls for in these same verses, and how can we apply them to our lives today.

How Should We Respond to What Is Coming?

While I laid out what Peter says we should expect as Christians in the order they were found in Chapter 4, I'm not going to take the six responses in the order they're found. When you read the entire Book, I started to see how the responses to these "Fiery Trials" relate to each other, and I've tried to correlate them to how we should face these trials in real life in today's world. I've ordered them in the order that I believe they come about in our souls. While some seem to happen simultaneously, I believe each of them in order gives birth to the next one. From the most basic response to the most definitive.

1) Do Not Be Surprised

The first response Peter mentions is found in 1 Peter 4:12, where he writes that we should not be surprised. "*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*" We have seen the *fact* that the trials are coming. They are not strange. They are not surprising. They are necessary in God's plan. They are his refining judgment. Now respond to this fact by not being surprised.

How many of you know someone, maybe yourselves, who seem to live a life where one tragedy befalls another? Where they seem constantly under attack, always stressed out, not finding any peace? When we are constantly surprised by the next trial that comes our way, we lose our life balance. A lack of balance in life leads to instability in all phases of one's life. Why do you think when Jesus walked the Earth as man, he kept retreating to a solitary place where He could regain His balance through communion with the Father?

I think we find this answer near the end of this Book of the Bible. In 1 Peter 5:12, he states that; ***“... this is the true grace of God, wherein you stand.”***

In God’s grace... This is the opposite of losing your balance, your stability, your firmness. The Book of 1 Peter, when applied, helps us to stand in God’s amazing grace. Accept the fact that a Christian life is going to be hard. **Life is hard! God is good! And glory is coming!**

So the first thing you must do—the foundational thing, the solid rock that you should build upon, is—accept the fact in both your heart and your soul that suffering is not strange. That’s where we start. We start with truth. Revealed truth about God and the way He runs the world He created. God is telling us; *“I do it this way. So don’t be surprised my precious child.”*

2) Commit Your Soul to Your Faithful Creator

Secondly, as Peter tells us in 4:19, we are to; ***“...commit our souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator”***. This word “Commit” is the same word used in Psalms 37:5-7, which reads; ***“Commit your way to the Lord, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.”*** I believe this verb “commit” has the same meaning as the word used in Luke 23:46 when Jesus cried out at the moment of His death, ***“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!”*** Do we have this same commitment to Christ? Or do we only claim to?

As Jesus made this statement with His last breath on this Earth, I believe it’s the same reality we see in 1 Peter 2:23 where he describes what Jesus was doing all through his suffering; ***“who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but COMMITTED Himself to Him who judges righteously.”*** So Jesus showed us how to suffer without retaliation, even when being treated so unjustly. We entrust the justice of our cause, and we commit our souls to our faithful Creator.

So why did Peter use the word “Creator” here? I think it because as this renewed intensity of Christian Persecution in today’s world progresses, as Peter expected it would way back then, there’s going to be a moment in our lives when it feels like God is least in control, when we think Christianity may not survive, when we fear that all hope is lost.

At that moment, when we look up from our weakness and our suffering; **THAT'S WHEN WE ARE GOING TO SEE THE ONE WHO CARES FOR US... OUR FAITHFUL CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE! THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA! THE GREAT "I AM"!**

Remember, as Christians, victory is already ours. All we have to do is have the faith to claim it.

3) Don't Be Ashamed of Being a Christian

Thirdly, our response should be to not be ashamed. Verse 16: "***Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.***" Oh how our human egos hate to be shamed! Little embarrassments are horrible, and big public shame is almost unbearable. Don't think so? Look at how many people commit suicide each year because they have to deal with shame. My business failed, I'm divorced, I was made a fool of by some evildoer.

If we fail as Christians to die to ourselves, then we doom ourselves to shame. We fail to honor God when we attempt to put ourselves above Him in this world. I'm not saying that we should not have self-worth, that we should have self-confidence; I'm saying that we should not think ourselves equal with God. **All glory is His, not ours.** Who here can quote Philippians 4:13?

And yet Christianity is founded on a shamed Christ. Back in 1 Peter 2:4, Peter describes the Christian life as; "***Coming to Him, as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God...***". We come to a rejected Christ. One who was Thrown out. Taunted, Despised. Hated, Slandered, Spit upon, Mocked, Stripped Naked, and Nailed to a wooden post just like an animal about to be slaughtered. 1 Peter 2:21 says, "***For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.***"

We should expect to have people put us down as Christians. Luke 6:26 reads; "***Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.***" So what did Jesus do when he was shamed? What example did He leave for us as to how we should deal with being shamed because we choose Christ? For that, I look to Hebrews 12:2, where I read that; "***...who for the joy was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.***" Jesus despised the shame. Shame encompassed Jesus as He

hung on that cross for you and me. And instead of cursing those who cursed Him, Jesus looked to the future and committed His soul to His, and our, faithful Creator. He looked into the face of shame and would give in to it. He **REFUSED** to give into shame and let it rob Him of completing the mission that He was sent to earth to fulfill. He succeeded in paying for all of our sins and lifting the veil so that each of us can commune in Heaven with the Father, through Him.

This is what Peter calls us to do; we are to be unashamed of Christ! Unashamed of being ridiculed, of facing sarcasm, and being mocked and belittled because we choose to accept Salvation and live our lives for God, as “citizens of Heaven.”

4) Rejoice

The fourth response to persecution is to REJOICE! Did you hear me? As we are instructed in Philippians 4:4; “***Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!***” When we suffer persecution because we Stand Up for Christ, we should look at 1 Peter 4:13 where it reads; “***but rejoice to the extent that you partake in Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.***” All throughout the New Testament, we find that among the earliest teachings of the church, the response to Christian suffering is joy. Jesus said it. Luke said it. Paul said. James said it. It was an utterly pervasive teaching of the early church: the Christian response to suffering is joy.

- Jesus, in Matthew 5:11-12, during the Sermon on the Mount said; “***Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted prophets who were before you.***”
- Luke said it in Acts 5:41 when he records in history how after the apostles were beaten and commanded to remain silent about Jesus’ resurrection; “***So they departed from the presence of the council, REJOICING that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.***” And what did Peter and John do next? They went back into the temple the next day and continued sharing the message of Salvation!

- Paul says it in Romans 5:3-4, and I like the Amplified Version of the Bible here; “***And not only this, but [with joy] let us exult in our sufferings and rejoice in our hardships, knowing that hardship (distress, pressure, trouble) produces patient endurance; and endurance, proven character (spiritual maturity); and proven character, hope and confident assurance [of eternal salvation].***”
- James teaches us in James 1:2-3, when he writes; “***My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.***”

How many of us has heard of, or ever used the expression; “*Laugh in the face of danger.*”? Many years ago, a group of us soldiers would recite; “*Yeah though we walk through the valley of death, we will fear no evil; for we are the meanest, baddest son-of-a-guns in the valley.*” I recognize now that I was subverting the Word of God, but that was our way of psyching ourselves up for the mission we were about to undertake. To “*laugh in the face of danger*” is a very foolish thing to do in this world, but I want you to remember, we, as Christians, are only temporary visitors to this world. As children of God, we are “Citizens of Heaven” and our victory was already won for us. So, when we face persecution for Standing Up For Christ, then we should indeed find great joy in knowing that **we just smacked ol’ Satan right between the eyes.** We should rejoice in knowing that we serve a great and glorious God, and that facing the persecution in this world is storing up treasures in our Heavenly Home.

5) Overflow in Good Deeds

Can I let you in on a secret I learned years ago from studying God’s word? The best way to exact revenge on someone who has persecuted, hurt, wronged, misrepresented or damaged you is to forgive them. No “eye for an eye” here, simply forgive them and then do some good deed for them. If you do this, God will send His angels to give them the worst case of heartburn in the world. They’ll cringe every time they see you until they find forgiveness for their actions from Our Father.

When we choose to live a joyful Christian life, with a joyous heart, our suffering will naturally overflow in good deeds to those who don’t deserve it. Verse 19 tells us that we are to “***...commit our souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.***”

Suffering, Committing your soul to God, Being Unashamed, Rejoicing in the fact that are persecuted because we have chosen to follow the will of God, Doing good to those would persecute us. We can't do these things without God's help.

Being Christian is much more than simply not doing bad things; being Christian requires us to love ALL people as Christ did. We show Christ's love by the projects and missions we undertake here at New Hope Church. We show God's love through our commitment to praying for those in our church, our community, our nation, and our world who need the strength and peace that can only be found in God. We show God's love by the way we live our lives. Not just the life that you demonstrate here at church on Sunday mornings, but the Godly way that we should live our lives at home, at work. Men, are you the spiritual leader of your household? Do you lead your family by the example you set as the leader of your family? Women, are you the submissive, supporting partner that even if your husband is not the spiritual leader of your family, you can win him to that goal by your conduct (1 Peter 3:1)? Children, do you honor your Mother and your Father? Do you subject yourselves to their authority over you? Even when they aren't the Christian they should be? It is these things that enable us to live the life we are called to as Christians.

As Christians, are you prepared to; "... *sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in your heart, with meekness and fear*" as Peter states in Chapter 3, Verse 15? Or do people see "hope in your heart" when you are troubled, when you are facing a "fiery trial"? Or do they see a professed Christian who is vengeful, who retaliates when he is wronged, who mires yourself in self-pity; lost, miserable, alone, and moping around.

I pray, that instead, when you face persecution, You are rejoicing! And that you return good for evil as 1 Peter 3:9 instructs. How, in the face of your joy could your persecutors not ask; "Why in the world are you rejoicing?" My answer is a simple one; **"It's because I don't belong to this world, I'm a King's Kid! My God is the one true God of this world and the great I AM. He is my faithful Creator."**

6) *Glorify God*

The final example of how we should respond to Christian persecution is to glorify God. Through God's amazing grace, delivered unto us through the Holy Spirit, our enemies will come to understand His power and His glory through the way we respond. 1 Peter 4:16 directs us; "***Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this manner.***"

If, when you suffer:

- you are not surprised, you trust God,
- you despise shame as Jesus did,
- you rejoice in the fact that your suffering is because of your Christian faith,
- you overflow in good deeds,
- you show that your treasure is not in this world but is in God,
- you show that He is glorious. That He is worthy of our praise.

If you do these things, then you enable God's Word, as it reads in 1 Peter 2:12; "***having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.***"

So whatever form your "Fiery Trials" take, know that God calls his chosen children to not be surprised. He calls we, who are bought by the sacrificial blood of the lamb, to commit our souls to Him, to despise the shame of this world, to rejoice in our trials, and to fill our lives with good deeds in the face of persecution. Know that when you Stand Up For Christ, you are amassing untold treasures in your home, the kingdom of Heaven. For with these treasures, you can glorify our God and joyfully lay them at the Master's throne.

So when the "Fiery Trials" find you, you recognize them not as a punishment from God, but as Job did, they are the purifying fires of God—meant to refine us as the purest of gold and prepare us to reside for eternity in Heaven.

In Summary

I remember a story that evangelist Billy Sunday used to tell many years ago. It was about a professing Christian who got a job in a lumber camp that had the reputation of being very ungodly. A friend, hearing that the man had been hired, said to him, “If those lumberjacks ever find out you’re a Christian, you’re going to be in for a hard time!” The man responded, “I know, but I need the job!” The next morning he left for camp.

A year later, he came home for a visit. While in town, he met his friend who asked, “Well, how did it go? Did they give you a hard time because you’re a Christian?” “Oh no, not at all,” the man replied. “They didn’t give me a bit of trouble—they never even found out!” (“Our Daily Bread,” 11/83.)

While we may chuckle at that story, some of us may have winced because it hits us a little too close to home! Living in a world that is hostile to Christianity, it’s easy just to blend in, to laugh at the dirty jokes, to never confront gossip, to never speak a word that identifies yourself as a Christian. Even the great Apostle Peter failed to Stand Up for Jesus, not once, but three times.

Sometimes even among our Christian friends—who sometimes don’t live much like they’re Christians—it’s hard to hold to your convictions for fear of what they will think.

Perhaps a hundred years from today, or perhaps just minutes from now, there will be only one choice that will matter to you: *Did I stand up for Christ?*

I’d like to end by reading you a daily devotional from Pastor James MacDonald of the Harvest Bible Chapel in the Chicago, IL area. Pastor MacDonald wrote this article; entitled “*Stand for Christ*” over five years ago.

He asks; “Do you confess Jesus Christ? Not just at church but everywhere you go? Is there a growing pattern of loyalty to Him? Does your love and loyalty to Him resonate in your heart? Whatever else I get done in this world, God help me stand for Him. I will not lower the flag. I will not back up or shut up or hide the reality of my allegiance to Jesus Christ. I *will not* do that. I *cannot* do that. I choose to stand.

By standing, I mean a state of mind from which we are free from doubt. Allegiance. Assurance. Certainty. Certitude. Commitment. Confidence. Decisiveness. Fidelity. Firmness. Fortitude. Grit. Loyalty. Persistence. Steadfast resolve. Tenacity. Trust.

The opposite of standing would be things like backing down. Doubting. Faltering. Hesitating. Indecision. Skepticism. Suspicion. Unbelief. Uncertainty. Vacillating. Wavering.

The people who know you best should be absolutely certain that you love Jesus Christ as your highest priority. Something is desperately wrong if they don't know that. Do you need to go to work this week and say, "Hey, there's something I've never told you about myself before. Let me tell you what matters to me most."

Are you standing for Christ? I commend this question to you for the rest of your life. Wherever life takes you, whatever happens to you, whatever you face or deal with that you couldn't possibly know of right now, may your deepest passion and commitment be the reality that you stand for Jesus. *Every chance I get, every place I go, this is what my life is going to be about.*

That's a powerful commitment. God can do awesome things with a person who is totally yielded to Him. There will be a day (unless the Lord returns first) when you will have a tombstone. Written on it will be the summary of your life. It would be amazing if it said, *This person confessed Jesus Christ. This person had a growing loyalty and an allegiance to Jesus, a growing pattern of standing with and for Jesus Christ.* What would be more important to your eternity than this?"

—James MacDonald

I close and surrender this service to Pastor Dean with this one last question?

WILL YOU STAND UP FOR JESUS CHRIST?