

Fiery Trials? Rejoice and Be Glad

Suffering According to God's Will

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today's sermon is titled "Fiery Trials? Rejoice and Be Glad"

As I have expounded on before, the Christian life is not easy. Any mature in Christ knows this, and any Christian who has just begun their walk will find this out sooner rather than later. Peter opens our Epistle reading with a quite disheartening statement to this effect, [1 Peter 4:12](#), "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." He declares to us plainly that we should expect "fiery trials" that come to test us. As mentioned, I have done a sermon on a similar topic before ('Endurance.' 4/15-16/2023), but the Lord knows full well that entire books have been written on the subject, so let us not shy away from examining it from another angle.

In order to explore what is encompassed by "the fiery trial," we first need the context of the book which contains the phrase. I want to make a quick aside, though, before we dig in. I will be making references to verses and chapters, and I will be using language which sounds like I am suggesting Peter himself assigned chapter and verse numberings to his work. He did not. It will sound like that simply due to how we talk about things in the English language, but the para-text which is our modern division of chapters and verses is unoriginal to the autographs of the texts. The story of the development of the system is a long and interesting one, but it is far beyond the scope of this sermon. Suffice it to say that the system, while imperfect, it is better suited for referencing the text than the *scriptio continua* of the day where the text had no upper/lower case distinction, no spaces between words, and no punctuation, and it is better than saying vague and uncertain markers like "in the first quarter of the text" or "near the end of the book." So, just keep in mind that Peter didn't divide his text like we do.

In 1 Peter, one of Peter's main themes is the sanctification of the Christian and

the Holy living that accompanies it. He builds this throughout the entirety of the book. Something of a thesis statement can be found in [1 Peter 1:14-16](#), “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” He charges believers to truly cast off the former sins and rather live for Christ. This is then developed and reiterated. In [1 Peter 2:11](#) he says, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” In [1 Peter 3:13-14](#) we see a hint about “the fiery trial”, “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.” Peter mentions harm and zeal for goodness, and he mentions suffering for righteousness’ sake. In the opening paragraph of chapter four we find this, [1 Peter 4:3-4](#), “For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;” The faithful Christian who turns his back on the world is, as reward for his effort, maligned by the world. And then, finally, we get to that phrase in question in [1 Peter 4:12](#), “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.”

So, what is this “fiery trial” then? What Peter means by this phrase is the problems a Christian will face because of his faith and his attempts at Holy living. There are two main types of “problems.” The first, and most obvious to the outside observer, is that the world will *hate* anyone who attempts follows Christ. Peter mentions this as being “maligned” for not engaging in former behaviors, and I’m sure everyone here has encountered this. After much struggle and prayer, you’ve finally broken a sinful habit you’ve had for years, and just as soon as it is gone, one of your friends suddenly complains that “you’re boring now” and “you used to be so much fun.” It could even have been a family member or even a partner. Or, you’re simply noted by those around as being a “buzzkill,” a “teetotaler,” or a “prude.” Even worse, though, is when the world actually criminalizes Christian behavior and morality. I am hard pressed to point to anything concrete in America and decry it as persecution (especially as we have been reading through Acts and see the abuses suffered first-hand by

the Apostles), though I do fear we may be on a steep slope heading towards it. I think of the Christian baker in Colorado who is currently on his second lawsuit because he refuses to make custom cakes for LGBTQ purposes, purportedly, breaking Colorado law.

The other, and less outwardly visible, side is that ancient serpent, the one called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, and his angels relentlessly tempting us daily into sin with and through our flesh. Peter describes this as a war waged against our soul. Now some people are gifted with a sensitivity to the spiritual things. They can feel the presence of beings both demonic and angelic. They can sense when that veil is thin or even rent. Of this gift, I cannot say much as I lack it, severely. I would go as far to say I have a spiritual insensitivity. I have been told I have other gifts, so I am not lacking for want of gifts of the spirit, but the Lord has seen fit to exclude this particular gift from this particular member of the body. Lacking the ability to describe this spiritual war first-hand, I turn to scripture for an account. The clearest description comes from Paul in [Ephesians 6:12](#), “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” And from our reading, even, [1 Peter 5:8](#), “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” There is a host of evil that attacks and besieges us. They want nothing more than for us to fall into temptation and sin. Sadly, that is just step one. Once they’ve convinced you to sin, they turn around and condemn you with chains of guilt for what you did. Then they whisper doubts about your salvation to you. And, after planting seeds of damnation, they double down and incite the falsely convinced “reprobate” to sin freely since it doesn’t make a difference anymore. It is a wicked thing, and the Devil has easily earned his spot in that lake of fire that was made for him and his angels.

These two parts of that “fiery trial” are hard and arduous. I can promise everyone here, everyone who was, and everyone still to come, that you will not win every battle nor every stage of it. You will slip up here and there. It is, sadly, unavoidable this side of Heaven. But why are we even subjected to this in the first place? Peter actually told us very openly. It comes upon us to, and I quote, “test us.” In the sermon I had mentioned earlier, I used an analogy of the trials

we face being like the process by which ore is turned into refined metal and then beautiful jewelry. I stand by that analogy and think it is very fitting. But here, in this sermon, with these readings, on this nuanced topic, I want to offer a different view. Why would we be tested? Imagine this: a father is teaching his child to ride a bicycle. Day after day the father dutifully runs behind the child, keeping him steady and pushing him along as the child learns how the bike works. The father does most of the work since the child doesn't have a grasp on how riding a bike really works. Eventually, though, the day comes when the child is peddling as the dad is supporting him and pushing him like always. But then, suddenly, the child feels the hands of his father pull away. The child is riding a bike under his own power. He's peddling; he's keeping himself upright. Five feet. Ten feet. Fifteen feet. The bike starts to wobble as the child is still unstable. He starts to panic, which only makes the problem worse. He's moments away from crashing the bike. And then, just as suddenly as he withdrew his hands, the loving, guiding, and supporting hands of the father steadies his child. So, it is with us and God. This "fiery trial" is when God removes his stabilizing hands from our backs to let us peddle under our "own" power. Now, of course, in our case, rather than muscle memory for riding a bike, we have the Holy Spirit and His sanctifying work inside of us, but the idea is the same. How can we show where we've grown in our walk with Christ if we never have a situation in which that fruit is needed? Can a man who has never been tempted say he knows anything about resisting it? Can a man who never knew hardship say he is content in those days of privation? If you've never been in a situation where all you could do was to commit everything to God and trust in Him, how can you be sure you have faith enough to do so? Would you be the child thinking he's been abandoned, or would you know and trust your Father is right behind ready to rescue you?

I will, as I seem to like doing, point out some practical advice drawn out from our scripture readings. The second half of our Epistle reading gives us profitable actions we can do whenever we feel like we're in the midst of a trial, when we feel those heavenly hands leave us. [1 Peter 5:6](#), "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you." Humble yourself! What a deceptively simply sounding advice which has been the ruin of many a people. Humbling yourself is hard, it is often easier for God to humble you by force. But, after the first couple times of, as they say, being

knocked down a few pegs, you start to get the idea. Remember you're not the main character, God is. Though God has a plan that involves you and involves Him working powerfully through you. Rather than trying to force your way of things, stop and pray for God to guide you towards what He has called you to do. In this way you can find yourself coming out of a season of trials into a season of exaltation as you find yourself in the perfect place at the perfect time to use your gifts. Again, [1 Peter 5:8](#) "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Keep your head on a swivel, and do not let your guard down. You do not know when, where, or in what form the tempter will appear. You must be vigilant and ready to examine yourself for error and temptations. And, lastly, [1 Peter 5:9](#), "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." When you are being tested to your limit, remember that you are not alone in this trial. Not only has the whole body of believers been tested likewise, or worse, but Christ Himself suffered and was tested worst of all.

So, with then, we have finally finished with the first half of the title of the sermon. We have gotten the "fiery trials" out of the way, and now we will, briefly, move on to why and how to rejoice and be glad. In our reading today, Peter follows the declaration of the trial with this, [1 Peter 4:13](#) "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." We are to rejoice "insofar as you share Christ's sufferings. Before we suffered, Christ suffered. He was tempted by the Devil himself in the wilderness for 40 days. He was mocked and attacked for His Truth and His Righteousness. And, ultimately, He was beaten, flogged, and killed for His perfect, unerring work. In baptism, we are brought fully into Christ - into His death, His suffering, and His resurrection. His suffering becomes our suffering, His death, our death, His new life, our new life, and His Righteousness becomes our righteousness. So, when we suffer in this fleeting, contrary world, we suffer sympathetically with Christ and with an expectant hope towards that day when Christ comes again. As we read, Peter tells us it is a blessing to be insulted for the name which is above all names, the name of Christ. And it truly is, Christ Himself says so. During the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, He says in [Matthew 5:11](#), "'Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.'" He said this so as to

shore you up in those days of nigh despair, to remind you that on that day of judgement those who stood fast under the trial may be glad “when His glory is revealed.”

And, if that isn’t enough to keep you in good cheer, remember these words and let them buffet the sorrow and anguish, [1 Peter 5:10-11](#), “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Let us pray for all of those going through their own fiery trials, and for the wisdom, courage, and strength to come through the other side unsinged.

Amen, and amen.