

The Fiery Trial, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:15-19

Code: 60-45

Let's take our Bibles at this time, as we come to the study of God's Word again tonight, and open it to 1 Peter chapter 4. We're looking at the text of verses 12 through 19 under the title, "The Fiery Trial." Now, as I noted for you last time, it is most likely that this epistle of 1 Peter was written late in the year 64 AD. That would put it a few months after the burning of Rome. You remember that Nero had burned Rome wanting, no doubt, to build a greater edifice to his own glory. And when Rome was burning and someone was needed to be blamed, he laid the blame on the Christians. And so, beginning in that year of 64 AD, there came an ever increasingly intense and outrageous and widening persecution of Christians. It is then in that context that Peter is writing his epistle. His readers would already be feeling some of the fury of a people who were anti-Christian to start with, and who now would hold Christians responsible for the tragedy of the burning of Rome and the death of people who were in that city. His readers scattered throughout the Roman world would also begin to feel the pressure of persecution. So, Peter is writing then to believers who are beginning to have the fire turned up, as it were, from those who were in an unbelieving role in the world, an unbelieving role I say as those dupes and agents of Satan set against the church of Christ.

To just get you in touch with that a little bit, go back to chapter 1 and get a feeling for this character within the epistle. Chapter 1 verse 6, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while if necessary you have been distressed by various trials." He mentions in verse 7 that such trials are testing their faith. Then, over in chapter 2 notice verses 11 and 12. He reminds them that they are aliens and strangers, and they are to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. They're to keep their behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds as they observe them glorify God in the day of visitation. So, the idea again comes forth that they were slandered as evildoers as well as persecuted for righteousness' sake. They were enduring distress and various trials.

In verse 19 of chapter 2 Peter alludes again to this. He says, "This finds favor if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if when you sin and are harshly treated you endure it with patience, but if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure, this finds favor with God." Over in chapter 3 then, and verse 8, he says to sum it up, "Let's be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind hearted and humble in spirit," then this, "not returning evil for evil or insult for insult." And again, indicating that they were being treated with an evil means and they were being insulted as well. Verse 14 says, "Even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear their intimidation, and do not

be troubled.” Verse 17 says, “It is better if God should will it so that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.” Then, in chapter 4 verse 1, “Since has Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” Expect it; it came to your Lord. Chapter 5 verse 10, “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

Now, you can tell then that in every chapter there is some reference made to unjust suffering. The church was being persecuted. As Peter begins here in chapter 4 verse 12, what is really the last section of his epistle flows all the way down through chapter 5, he again visits this same theme. He is concerned about suffering for righteousness’ sake, suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to me to look at the world around us. We’re looking at a church in Eastern Europe and a church in Russia, Soviet Union, that has suffered greatly for a number of years, a number of decades. That church is emerging out of its suffering season and will be granted freedoms. In some ways, that church may turn out to have greater freedom than we do as Christians in America. It seems to me that the trend here is quite the opposite. Rather than a church emerging out of an atheistic humanistic society as we are seeing in Eastern Europe, we have atheism and humanism emerging out of a quote-unquote Christian culture. And atheism and humanism will eventually in our own nation become more aggressively the persecutor of the church.

What Peter is saying here then may speak to us in our own lifetime and the lifetime of our children. As our nation becomes more and more intolerant of the Christian faith in its quest for fulfilling its amoral life style, we will become a greater and greater threat. So, Peter’s words must be taken to heart. Already, there is a growing persecution against those that name the name of Jesus Christ. If you are to speak, for example, publicly against the sins of our culture, sexual sins, particularly the sin of homosexuality, you will find a hostility that can be on its fringes frightening and even life-threatening. We are living in a day when those who live strongly for Christ and who confront the culture, and whose testimony is on the cutting edge, and who say what ought to be said where it ought to be said may find themselves in trouble and under great distress and persecution. So be it, we should be ready for it.

In order to be ready, should that come, and even to endure what we are already experiencing, we need to take to heart verses 12 through 19. Here Peter gives us the proper way to deal with suffering for righteousness’ sake. And I have to tell you that I’ve gone over this repeatedly in my own mind because I get a little of this. It’s amazing to me that sometimes the suffering for righteousness’ sake comes from within the church, within the framework of Christianity. There can be hostility, and unkindness, and threats, and who knows what. I have found myself retreating to the truths of this passage on a number of occasions, and more so recently than at any other time in my life. But let me read you verses 12 through 19 just to set it in your mind. “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. But 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 exaltation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or a troublesome meddler, but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed but in that name let him glorify God; for it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God. And, if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God and trust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right.”

Now, all of that is rich, rich truth. To dissect it a little bit and put it in manageable bites, you have here several great truths that summarize our response to suffering unjustly. Now, let me say this before I dig into these words. You only suffer for righteousness' sake when you are visibly righteous. It is only when you live godly in an unrighteous culture that you create the hostility. If you manage to hide your virtue, if you manage to hide your testimony for Christ, if you manage to sublimate the fact that you are a Christian so that no one can perceive it, then it is unlikely that you will suffer. But for those who live righteous, those who demonstrate their commitment to Christ, those who speak boldly, those who say what needs to be said where it needs to be said, there will be a hostile reaction.

Now, when that happens, there are a number of things that you must take to heart. First of all, the first point in this wonderful summary by Peter is to expect suffering. Verse 12, “Don't be surprised at it.” We've gone into this; this is just review. Expect it, it is inevitable. And God has brought it to test you. It comes on you for your testing, to prove to you the genuineness of the state of your Christianity, to purge your life for greater holiness. It is God's test to show that you're really gold. And when the fire has come and gone, you're still there, non-combustible, pure, refined, purged for greater use to God. So, since God wants you maximally useful, and since He wants you to have your calling in election sure, then He brings suffering inevitably into your life to prove and test the genuineness of your faith. If your faith is not genuine when the test comes, like the seed thrown against the hard soil, you may show some signs of faith, but you will have no fruit and under tribulation, you will wither and die. So, the fiery ordeal will show you the reality of your faith. Expect it, it is inevitable, it is in God's purpose. It is inevitable also because a righteous life in an unrighteous culture is a confrontation that that culture does not well tolerate, it fights back.

Secondly, not only expect suffering, but rejoice in suffering. Verse 13 says, “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 exaltation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you're blessed because the Spirit of glory and the Spirit of God rests on you.” Here, he's simply saying rejoice in it. Why? You share Christ's sufferings. Why? You will share Christ's glory at His unveiling. Why? Because as you suffer now, the Spirit of God rests on you. He takes over to refresh, and strengthen, and build you. So, you can rejoice. Sometimes this is quite challenging, to be honest with you. When I have been battered

around a little bit and say to myself, “Well, I should expect it, after all if I desire to live a godly life, and preach the truth of God, and if I want to hold the standard of holiness very high, and if I want to hold the standard of doctrinal purity and biblical truth very high, I can expect to get this, so I must be ready for it.” I can usually handle that. It’s moving to that second one where I rejoice over it that challenges me. Where I say, “Thank You, Lord, this is really wonderful, I’m loving every minute of this.” I find that sometimes a bit much. But I, by the grace of God, if I have the time to meditate on it and to lay it before the Lord, I find that the Spirit of God fills my heart with joy and it’s usually the joy two-fold, the joy of participation in the sense that no matter what I might suffer, it is small compared to what Jesus Christ suffered and yet I am a partaker of His suffering. And the second element that hits me hard is that whatever suffering I may incur in this life shall be more than rewarded in the eternal joy which shall be mine forever in the presence of the Lord. Rejoice in it.

The third very necessary perspective with regard to suffering is to evaluate the suffering. Expect suffering, rejoice in suffering, and evaluate suffering. In other words, when you’re suffering take a look at why. Verse 15, “By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or a troublesome meddler.” There are four evils mentioned there that really are typical of an unregenerate lifestyle and they are used to illustrate the character of unacceptable suffering. They’re very obvious, at least the first three. Don’t suffer as a murderer. I mean, if you murder somebody and you suffer, and they persecute you, and put you in prison or take your life, don’t moan and complain. Same thing with being a thief. Don’t suffer as a thief and an evildoer. By the way, the word “evildoer” is to cover all the crimes not mentioned in the first two words. Those first two are pretty broad: murder and thievery. And then, summing up all the rest, don’t suffer as an evildoer, all forms of wickedness and sin. Then, he adds one other very interesting word, he says, “Or a troublesome meddler.” You say, “Well, how in the world did you get a troublesome meddler in there with a murderer, a thief and an evildoer?” Because this is a very, very interesting word. By the way, it’s only used here in the whole New Testament. That always challenges the lexicographer, or the person who has to define the terms. It’s the only usage of the word then we want to be sure we understand what it means. Some say it means busybody, nosy. You know nosy people? Always checking into everybody’s business but their own? Some people think it means that. Some people think it means a sort of a mischief maker, trouble maker. Some people think it means a revolutionary, I mean, an outright revolutionary who just disrupts society. It is a very interesting word.

The word is *allotrioepiskopos*. *Episkoposis* is the word for overseer. And if you combine the two words together, it means someone who looks over, or someone who intrudes into things that belong to someone else. Someone that looks over or intrudes into things that belong to someone else. It is a sort of “mind your own business” word.

Now, what, why does he throw that in here? Wouldn’t it be covered by an evildoer? Well, there’s more to it than that. This word, I think, has a more specific significance than is at first apparent. Let me just give you some other scriptures that might help you to kind of get a feel for the meaning. Back in 1

Thessalonians 4:11, you don't need to turn to it, Paul says to the Thessalonians, "You are to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands just as we commanded you." You're not to be a trouble maker. You're not to be a rabble-rouser. You're not to stir up your society. You're to lead a quiet life. You are to attend to your own business and to work with your own hands. Do your own trade. Stay out of other matters. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 verse 11 he says to the Thessalonians, "For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all but acting like busybodies," a different word here. You're acting like busybodies. "Now, such persons we command and we exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in a quiet fashion, eat their own bread." In other words: back off, be quiet, do your own work.

Then, when Paul wrote to Timothy in the very next letter in the order of the New Testament, chapter 5 verse 13, and he's talking about young women here. He says they should learn, well, when they're married they learn to be idle as they go around from house to house and not merely idle but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Now, here he's talking about something different. It's the same thought of busybodies, probing into things that are not their own affairs. But it seems to me that while here it's very specifically talking about a woman who is widowed, and who has nothing to do, and so she floats around and just puts her nose in everybody's affairs, whereas in Thessalonians in the first and the second letter he is talking about how you conduct yourself not so much among the people you know, like the widow here, but how you conduct yourself in the society. And I believe that is precisely what Peter is talking about. With that in mind, consider again what Peter says. You are not to be a troublesome meddler.

Now, some people feel, and I tend to agree with them, that what he means here has a special reference to political agitation, that he's talking here about getting involved in revolutionary disruptive activity, interfering, meddling in the function and the flow of government. This would surely lead to the government taking action, which then the person would see as persecution. It could be in a business, working on the job, that you become a troublesome meddler thinking that because you're a Christian you should be treated differently, and because you have Christian standards you should force your company to apply Christian standards, and so you become disruptive, and you become a meddler, and you become a revolutionary to one degree or another. This would lead to suffering.

Now, what it's saying is this, very, very important. You are a Christian, and you are living in a non-Christian culture, do your work, live a quiet life, exalt Jesus Christ, preach the gospel, but don't try to overturn the culture. Don't become a revolutionary. Don't meddle. Or, if you do and you are being persecuted by the government as a troublesome meddling agitator, that is disgraceful. That is not honorable for a Christian.

So, you have to ask yourself: why am I suffering? If you are living your Christian life, living a virtuous godly life, presenting Jesus Christ every opportunity you are given, but working quietly with your hands, being faithful to your task, being a noble citizen in every way, being responsible to do the task

within the culture, not a disruptive force, and you are persecuted, it is for righteousness' sake. But, if you have taken it upon yourself to force your Christian thinking upon your culture, whether it's the corporate culture in which you function, or the shop in which you function, or the state or the government in which you live, you've stepped beyond the boundaries. And I think Peter is simply reemphasizing here what he said back in chapter 2 that we are to be citizens who are models of submission to every human institution to everyone in authority. So, Peter is saying, "Look, if you suffer as a murderer and the government comes in and puts the penalty on you, if you suffer as a thief and the government comes in and sentences you, if you suffer as some kind of evildoer involving any other criminal offense and the government takes you prisoner, or if you have become an agitator of the status quo and a social revolutionary, then don't count that as suffering for righteousness' sake. You should be ashamed of that.

So, you have to do an inventory. You have to evaluate the suffering. You say, "I'm suffering. Why am I suffering?" Verse 16 says, "If anyone suffers as a Christian," in other words you suffer just for being a Christian, "let him not feel ashamed." The implication is: if you're suffering because you're a murderer, you're a thief, you're a criminal of some kind, or you're a troublesome meddler disrupting the society, you should be ashamed. But if you suffer while you're doing your job, living a quiet and tranquil and peaceable life, honoring Jesus Christ, being the best citizen you can possibly be, and proclaiming faithfully the gospel of Christ, and you suffer, you have no reason to be ashamed, in fact, "In that name let him glorify God." What a statement. If anyone suffers as a Christian in that name, the name Christian, you will glorify God.

It's a beautiful term, by the way, Christian. The early Christians spoke of themselves as brethren. They spoke of themselves as the saints, or the holy, the consecrated people. They spoke of themselves, I love this phrase, as those of the way; Jesus being the way, the truth and the life. But, their Jewish opponents stigmatized them as the Nazarenes. They also gave them a name which they intended to be a name of derision. They called them Christians. That was not, first of all, a name that Christians assumed. I don't think they would have been so bold as to assume that they could bear the name of their Christ. It was given to them by the world. First at Antioch, according to Acts 11. Agrippa, again in Acts 26, I think about verse 28, makes reference to it. And eventually, it came to be claimed by believers. But first, it was a mocking term. It came to be a beloved term, as it is for us. So, he says, if you suffer because you're a Christian, don't be ashamed. But in that name, the name Christian, in that name, as a follower of Jesus Christ, let him glorify God. What does that mean? Praise God for the privilege. Why? Because you're sharing in the sufferings of Christ, because the Spirit of glory is strengthening you, because you are adding to your weight of eternal glory. All three of those reasons.

And there's one more reason in verse 17. "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God. And if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" This is an interesting verse. He is saying that if you suffer as a Christian, then for the sake of the name Christian, you ought to be happy to suffer and you ought to praise God for the privilege

because you're sharing Christ's sufferings, because the Spirit of glory rests on you and strengthens you, and you must rejoice in the strength of the Spirit, and because you are adding to the weight of your eternal reward. Then, he adds here, "You should look at suffering as a sign that the end is near, and so it's time to clean up the household of God." Boy, that's an important statement. Back in verse 7, do you see how verse 7 starts? "The end of all things is at hand." The end of all things is at hand. So, he says there in verse 17, it is the time for judgment. And by the way, the word "time" here is not *chronos*. It's not clock time; it's *kairos*. It means it is the crucial moment, it is the point, it is the season for judgment to begin. Boy, this is a great statement.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, I want you to follow my thought here, with the coming of Jesus Christ came the Christian dispensation we know as the dispensation of the church. Christ came and suffered and died. That is the beginning of the end. It is the last time already. Christ appeared in the end of the age. We are living in the end time, the last time. So, Peter says it is already the time for judgment to begin. Where did it begin? It began on the cross when our sins were judged in Christ. And we are living in a season of judgment. The sufferings of Christians, then, are a part of God's plan for an unfolding judgment which culminates in the Great White Throne.

Now, follow this. Peter's not speaking of condemnation when he uses judgment. He's speaking of chastening, of testing, of purifying, of purging. But he is saying, he's giving us a hint about this dispensation. He's saying in this dispensation, God will be judging. And to begin His judgment, He is judging or purging, or testing, or chastening, purifying His church. And it starts that way and it ends with the final condemnation of the ungodly. That's what he says. If judgment begins in God's purging the household of God, and begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? In other words, if God has a judgment for those who believe, and it's as important and serious as it is, then what will the judgment be for those who do not believe? The people of God are being judged, tested, to remove the chaff, they're being sifted, purged to remove the dross. The church is always in the process of being purged and purified. The household of God here means the church, the assembly of redeemed people in a collective way. Back in chapter 2 verse 5 we are called a spiritual house, a spiritual house. In 1 Timothy 3:15 the household of God is the church of the living God. First Timothy 3:15 says, "The household of God is the church of the living God." So, that's what he's saying. Peter is talking about the church. And he is really speaking collectively here. And he's saying if God has already purifying His church, if there is a purging going on in His church that is necessary.

Now, what's it going to be like when He brings His final judgment on those who do not obey the gospel of God? This purging, this evaluating, this testing is necessary in this age. There's kind of a wonderful analogy of this in Ezekiel 9:6. Back in Ezekiel when God looked over the sinful people on the earth, and He wanted to cleanse them, He said, "I want to cleanse the earth," that was His intent and He said this, and I quote, "Begin at My sanctuary. Start with Israel." God ultimately will judge the ungodly. Right now, He's purging, purifying His church. So, when you suffer for righteousness' sake,

it is God's purging, God's purifying, God's testing. And I'm telling you, when you look at the church that has been purged, and you look at the church that has been tested, and you look at the church that has been persecuted, you find the pure church, do you not? So, look at your persecution. See it for what it is. Is it God beginning the judgment at the household which He loves and beginning the purging of His judgment during this age? You see, before the full final judgment comes, the church has to evangelize the world. And in order to be effective in evangelizing the world, the church must be purged from sin, the true separated from the false, and the carnal cleansed or removed. And then, the pure church can move out.

And so, look at the persecution as the judgment of God that must come, and it must come first on the household before it comes to the strangers. First, He will purify His church; then He will judge the ungodly. If it begins with us first, and it does, what's going to be the outcome of those who do not believe? God's judgment does begin at the household. It doesn't end there. Peter looks beyond to the tragedy of eternal judgment. And what is he saying? Here's the point. Get this. "It's far better to endure suffering as the Lord purges the church, and endure it with joy, than to endure suffering in the future which is eternal." You see his point? Hey, look at your suffering and consider this. You say it's tough to suffer, better you should suffer now as He tests and purges you and fits you for usefulness and glory, than that you should not suffer now but suffer then forever and ever. That's far worse. And it comes on those, verse 17, who do not obey the gospel of God. That's reminiscent of Romans 1:1 to 5 where Paul uses the same phrase, "the gospel of God, the good news about Christ."

What will be the outcome, he asks? I'll tell you what: terrifying judgment, eternal damnation. Second Thessalonians 1:4, and following talks about the persecuted church, and how the church has persevered in faith in the midst of persecution and affliction. And then, in verse 5 he says, "This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment, so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you indeed are suffering." He's saying you ought to know that this is a plain indication, all this tribulation, all this trouble, all this suffering is a very plain indication that God is judging you, He's purging you, He's cleaning you, He's testing you, making you more useful. He's letting you share in the sufferings of Christ. He's building for you in a great eternal weight of glory. And that's far better than what the rest of the world is going to experience. "For after all, it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels and flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction." So, don't be complaining about suffering now and having glory later. There are many who miss the suffering now, but will endure it forever and ever and ever.

Peter then supports his point with a quote in verse 18. This quote is taken from Proverbs 11:31. Peter says, "And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?" Proverbs 11:31 actually says, "If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much

more the wicked and the sinner?" Peter freely interprets the words. When he says, "And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved," difficulty refers to the hard time that persecution brings to the believer. Our salvation brings persecution. Our salvation brings a hardship, a judgment, a disciplinary, corrective, purgative, instructive, remedial testing through suffering that, get this, keeps us from committing damning sins. That judgment will continue in the church until the Rapture, and even after that. When God redeems a new generation of people, they too will suffer. And if it's so difficult, and there's so much suffering as a Christian being purged, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? He asks. What kind of suffering will they endure if we have to endure this? And the answer is a far greater suffering. They will be cast into the lake of fire which burns with fire and brimstone forever and ever where the worm dies not, the fire is not quenched.

So, all of this helps us to see the importance of a clear evaluation of our suffering. It is to be for righteousness' sake, not become of sin. We are not then to be ashamed when we suffer, but to honor God because He is purifying His church where judgment must begin if we're going to be a pure people to reach the world. And so, when you see yourself suffering, look at it, see it for what it is, evaluate it. It should be a good reminder of how much more severe judgment could be and will be for those without Christ. How do you handle suffering? Expect it, rejoice in it, evaluate it, see it for what it really is. It's God graciously purging His church for usefulness, for communion with Christ, for greater weight of glory. It's not to be compared with that terrible suffering that the sinners and ungodly will endure forever.

One final point: expect suffering, rejoice in suffering, evaluate suffering; fourthly, entrust yourself to God. A godless man can't do that. The sinner can't do that; it would be too late. You and I can in the midst of our suffering. Verse 19, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right." The word therefore is there because of the true perspective on suffering just summed up. Because you now understand suffering, you now understand that it is remedial, corrective, purgative, instructive. You understand that God uses it to test you, to purge you, to make you more useful, to give you a greater weight of glory. "Therefore, in the midst of it, let those also who suffer according to the will of God," it is in His will as He cleanses His church, "entrust their souls."

We are suffering according to the will of God. It is His purpose, it is His intended purpose for His children: to purge, purify, chasten, to make us tender, to make us effective. The word "entrust," by the way, is a banking term. It means to deposit for safekeeping, just go through suffering taking your soul, and depositing it with God. The word "soul" means your life, your being, your person. "Give it to a faithful creator." That's the only place in the Bible where that phrase is used. Why does he use it? Listen to this, he uses the word "creator" to remind us that we're simply giving back to God what He created, which means that He is most capable of caring for it, right? And when we say He is a faithful creator, we can trust Him with it. As creator, He best knows the needs of His beloved creatures. As a faithful creator, He will meet those needs because He is faithful to His promise. "My God shall supply

all your needs.” By the way, the word “entrust” here, entrust their souls to a faithful creator, *paratithmi*, is the same word exactly used of Jesus when on the cross He entrusted His Spirit to the Father. Same word. In the midst of His suffering, He gave Himself to God. Peter says give your life to God for Him to sustain in the midst of the greatest suffering, and He is trustworthy, and He will be faithful. And that verse ends, “In doing what is right.”

That’s where it ought to be. We do what’s right; we commit ourselves to God. We suffer, we entrust our souls to a faithful creator, and do what is right. To say it another way: while doing what is right, take what comes; commit yourself to God. No defection, obedience, commitment, faithfulness. Just keep doing what is right. So, when suffering comes to the believer, we expect it, we rejoice in it, we look at it closely and evaluate it. Is it a result of sin, or is it a result of righteousness? And is God just purging, purifying, testing, that we might be more useful, more glorious?

I was thinking of Geoffrey Bull. At the age of 30, he had been held for three years and two months by the Chinese communists. Part of the time he was held in solitary confinement, he was half-starved, threatened, badgered, subjected to the infernal techniques of brainwashing. He was desperately holding on to some power of objectivity in his brain by making at one time a special study of the six different types of mosquitoes in his cell just to keep his sanity. In the midst of all of this, he composed a long, long poem which I could never take the time to read, but I will read you five stanzas, brief ones. This was his prayer in the midst of horrible suffering: “Let not Thy face grow dim, dear God, nor sense of Thee depart. Let not the memory of Thy Word burn low within my heart. Let not my spirit, Lord, grow numb through loneliness or fears. Let not my heart, to doubt succumb, and keep my eyes from tears. Let not the distance come between as months and years increase. Let not the darkness close me in. Let me not lose Thy peace. Let not the pressure of the foe crush out my love for Thee. Let not the tiredness and the woe eclipse Thy victory.” The last verse, “For Thy joy is my joy; and my hope, Thy day; and Thy kingdom, gracious God shall never pass away.” We have to live in that kind of confidence. Let’s bow in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the testimony of a faithful saint in the midst of unbearable circumstances who found his strength in You. We thank You, Lord, that it is Your will to purge and purify, and cleanse us through difficulty, and particularly through persecution as we are bold for Christ. May we know that if we are not bold for Christ, we shall not know the suffering, nor shall we know the glory of communion with the suffering Savior, nor shall we know the glory of the Spirit resting on us, nor shall we know the eternal glory. No, Lord, if we’re not willing to be bold for Christ, we can escape, but we cannot be the tested, refined, purged, purified, useful vessel. So, test us, Lord, as we are faithful. Begin that judgment with us, that Your church might be clean, useful to You, and we’ll thank You for such a privilege; and that though we are judged here and now, we will be forever free from any judgment, only to share in Thine eternal glory. Father, we would pray for any in our midst tonight who have escaped suffering for righteousness in this life, but will suffer for sin forever. May this be the day that they come to the Savior to repent of their sin and acknowledge Him as Lord and God, Redeemer.

We pray in His name. Amen.

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