

1 Peter 4:15-19

Introduction

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the burning fire when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

Last week we reflected on what these verses mean for us; now, Peter wants to make doubly and triply sure that we know what these verses *don’t* mean. He continues in verse 15:

I. 1 Peter 4:15 — But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

To be ostracized and rejected, to be mocked and labeled as a social misfit, to be disadvantaged or treated unfairly truly “for the name of Christ” and truly as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ is a “glorious” thing. But we can’t automatically assume that any mistreatment we endure as Christians is always “legitimate.” Peter knows that sometimes Christians can actually “deserve” the persecution they receive from the world. And, so, one of his main goals throughout this letter has been to show that even as we **rejoice** in all of our sufferings for Christ, we must also do everything we possibly can to **avoid** any suffering that’s justly deserved. (cf. 2:12-16, 20; 3:6, 9-13, 16-17) This is a “balance” that really does require discernment and wisdom.

- 1 Peter 2:20 — What credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.
- 1 Peter 3:17 — It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

And now, here in verse 15 of chapter four: “Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.” Peter’s point isn’t that he thinks some of his readers might actually be guilty of murder and theft and all manner of evil deeds. We obviously can’t say to ourselves that as long as I haven’t killed someone or robbed a bank, then any mistreatment I ever receive must be a sharing in the sufferings of Christ and a sign of my union with Him. Peter’s just taking the most obvious examples of what all the world considers to be wrong and unacceptable and then using these most obvious examples to stand for everything else that the world rightly considers wrong and unacceptable. So Peter begins with things like murder, and theft, and evildoing, but then he concludes with something as “tame” as “meddling.” All the world agrees that meddlers and busybodies are a plague and a nuisance.

Peter’s word for “meddler” (*allotriepiskopos*) is made up of two Greek words; first, there’s the word for “other” or “others” (*allos*) and then there’s the word for “overseer” (*episkopos*) – so, “overseer of others.” If we combine this evidence with the way the word is used in other contexts outside of the Bible,* we could say that the meaning of this word is “overseeing—or meddling

* “The reference in Dionysius is to bishops who encroach on another’s diocese. The first text in Epiphanius is part of an exposition of 1 Cor 2:10, to the effect that the Holy Spirit is not probing into alien matters in searching out the

in—other people’s lives.” When Paul talks about busybodies, he uses a different Greek word (*periergazomai/periergos*), and he seems to be thinking of busybodies at work inside the church, meddling in the affairs of others inside the covenant community. (cf. 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13) But Peter’s thinking of Christians who might actually be persecuted *by the world* because of their meddling, and so I wonder if this might explain why he uses this word that includes the specific idea of “overseeing others.” (cf. Michaels) I think what Peter has in mind here is the “goody-two-shoes” mentality – the “holier-than-thou” “I have the moral high-ground” way of thinking that leads to professing Christians being annoying at best, and mean at worst. In other words, these are Christians who think it’s their job to be the world’s conscience, to police the morality of unsaved family members or co-workers, or classmates, or neighbors – to be “prophets” to our culture. And then when these Christians are persecuted for being meddlers and busybodies, how do they excuse themselves?—“I’m just suffering for the name of Christ – for speaking the truth.”

Sometimes “speaking truth” is motivated deep down by pride, judgmentalism, and even anger. The Bible calls this kind of truth-telling “meddling” and says that any “suffering” this results in is completely deserved. I wonder how much of what professing Christians post on the internet, today (and then “suffer” for), is nothing more than meddling motivated by pride, judgmentalism, and anger – the meddling that Peter condemned as being in the same general category as murder, and theft, and evildoing?

I’m not sure if this is the best summary of what Peter’s saying, but I think it’s helpful: One commentator writes, “Peter wanted believers to refrain from acting tactlessly and without social graces.” (Schreiner) So the question is, can we boldly and uncompromisingly proclaim the truth of the Gospel in word and in deed while still being “tactful” and observant of “social graces”? Peter says that we *must*, and the Apostle Paul is a really good model of this in the book of Acts. Who’s ever been more bold and more uncompromising than Paul? And yet Paul also knew how to be humble, and tactful, and “socially aware.” (Acts 17:22-32; cf. 14:8-18; 24:10-26; 26:1-32) In chapter three, Peter said that in all of our witness before the world, we’re to be characterized by a meekness and a reverence before God (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15), which means that we’ll never, ever give any unnecessary offense to the Gospel and never, ever suffer a persecution that we actually deserve. That’s not compromise, according to Peter, that’s obedience. In all our interactions with the world, whether in our cars, or on the phone, or behind the screen, or in person, is it our conscious goal to avoid at all costs any persecution or mistreatment that’s justly deserved? And is our motive for this not simply to make our own lives easier, but rather to be always giving the very best name possible to the cause of Christ our Savior?

But now there’s another side to this. There’s also a real danger that as Christians we might excuse our compromise as “tactfulness” or our conforming to the world as “love” or observing “social graces.” But Peter has also emphasized a black and white dichotomy between living for our human passions and desires (**which all the Gentiles do**) and living for the will of God. These two things, Peter’s said, are separated by a wide gulf and have nothing at all in common with each other. (cf. 4:1-4) Peter says that we’ve all been called not just to live “good” lives, but also

‘deep things of God,’ but into that which is his proper concern; the second makes the point that Jesus, when he broke the Sabbath, was not abrogating the work of another, but was, as God, doing his own proper work. The common idea in these few uses of ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος appears to be that of meddling in things that are none of one’s business.” (Michaels)

to live holy lives – and that’s the kind of living that naturally excites the animosity of the world. (cf. 1:2, 13-19) And so we live with this constant tension: On the one hand we ought to be inspiring the admiration of the world by the “good” and “tactful” lives that we live, while on the other hand, that admiration will often be overwhelmed by the hostility that **we also inspire** by the “holy” lives that we live. Are you seeing that to live the kind of “**good**” *and* “**holy**” lives that God has called us to in this world requires wisdom—a wisdom that only comes from God through His Word, illuminated by His Spirit? So Peter goes on to say in verse 16:

II. 1 Peter 4:16 — Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

There are only two other places in the Bible where the word “Christian” is used.

- Acts 11:26 — In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.
- Acts 26:28 — Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

In both of these verses, the disciples are called “Christians” by unbelievers and probably in a way that’s meant to be demeaning. The “Herod-ians” (cf. Mk. 3:6; 12:13) were those who submitted to Herod as the king appointed by Rome to rule over Judea. The “Christ-ians” were those who submitted to Christ as the king appointed by God to rule over all the world. But it seemed stupid, literally, for anyone to pledge their allegiance to a man who’d been condemned and crucified as a Roman criminal. So the world mocked the disciples and reminded them of their “stupidity” by labeling them “Christians.” The holy, set apart life so offensive to the Gentiles was in their eyes the result of a fanatical allegiance to a crucified and buried common criminal. Are we feeling more and more the same mockery and derision by our culture today? And are we betraying in any way shame or embarrassment by the compromise of holy living? While on the one hand, we **avoid** at all costs any and all suffering that’s deserved, on the other hand we’re called to **embrace at all costs** any and all suffering that truly does come because of our devotion to Christ – because of our commitment to living every day not for the desires of our flesh but wholly for the will of God. Let me say that last part again: All of the suffering that may ever come because of our commitment to true holiness of life is to be something we actually embrace and glory in and own for ourselves at any and all costs. That’s what Peter means when he says, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” In other words, let him not compromise or conform to the world in order to avoid even the least part of *this* suffering (cf. Mk. 8:38; Rom. 1:16; 2 Tim. 1:8, 12, 16; 2:15), but rather let him confess Christ all the more—in word and in deed—to the glory of God. (cf. Rom. 1:21)

Now why would we embrace suffering at all costs by only doing all the more the very things that invited that suffering in the first place? That goes against every natural, human instinct. So, even though Peter has answered this question many times already, he answers it again, here (building on what he said last week in verses 12-14). Do you see how concerned Peter is that we all move past our “natural human instincts” to a spiritual insight and discernment that comes through the Word of God? The natural man cannot truly discern the things of the Spirit of God, so as we come now to verses 17 and 18, let’s pray that God would give us His Spirit so we can truly understand and think His thoughts after Him. (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-14)

III. 1 Peter 4:17a — For it is time for judgment to **start from** [*archo... apo*] the house of God...

When we hear the word “judgment,” we usually think of something negative like punishment or condemnation. But we could also think of the same “judgment” having two different outcomes or results – one that’s positive and one negative. What Peter has in mind, here, is that burning fire that we saw last week in verse 12. In verse 12, the fire was burning in the Church, testing and proving what we already are and refining us and transforming us into what we’ll one day be. But now Peter takes this image of the burning fire and he wants us to see that this fire that’s burning even now in the church is one and the same with the fire that will one day burn in all the world. Peter writes in his second letter:

- 2 Peter 3:10–12 — The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

It's this fire, Peter says, that has begun to burn already in the house of God. Once again, Peter wants us to view the present as the beginning, already, of the end. He wants us to see all the fires of suffering and persecution in the present—wherever these fires may be burning—as already the beginning of the final assize when all will be summoned to stand before God and face the burning fire of His holy judgments.

What is the time, brothers and sisters? “It is time for judgment to begin...” The fires of the final conflagration, the fires of the final judgment through which all without any exception must pass have already been kindled. It’s already time. And where do we see these fires burning? Peter says that this is the fire burning in the Church – in the suffering and persecution of God’s people. This is the fire that’s even now testing and proving what we already are and refining us and transforming us into those who will be fit for God’s holy presence. Do you see how living in these “last days” gives to everything associated with these last days a truly eschatological flavor and meaning?

But why is it so important to Peter that we see and understand this? It’s because this discernment, this genuine heart understanding, is what will enable us to endure with rejoicing even in the midst of the fire. The fire is something through which all must pass, and yet we know that the result of this fire, for us, is not destruction, but purification; we are not consumed in the fires of God’s judgment, but only proved and refined and made fit for the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The fires of the final, end-times judgment have been kindled in the church, but from the church they will one day spread.

IV. 1 Peter 4:17 — For it is time for judgment to **start from** [*archo... apo*] the house [*oikos*] of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Peter's drawing here from a basic principle and idea laid down in the Old Testament Scriptures: If God judges His own people, how could we ever think that the rest of the nations will escape?

- Isaiah 10:11–12 — “Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols as I have done to Samaria and her images?” [But] when the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria.
- Jeremiah 25:29 — Behold, I begin to work disaster at the city that is called by my name, and shall you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, declares the LORD of hosts.

Peter especially seems to be borrowing the language of Ezekiel chapter 9:

- Ezekiel 9:4–6 — And the LORD said... “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And **begin at [apo... archo]** my sanctuary.” So they **began with [archo... apo]** the elders who were before the house.

Peter borrows this language, and the basic overall idea, but he's applying it now in a very different context. In the Old Testament, the judgment that begins with God's people is the result of their disobedience and unfaithfulness in breaking the covenant. In the Old Testament, even the fire that burns in God's house is one that results in death and destruction. But when Peter's writing, the Old Covenant has been replaced with the New Covenant, and now the New Covenant people are faithful and obedient—covenant-keepers—which is precisely why they're being persecuted. Therefore, the same fires that in the Old Testament brought destruction on God's people, are now in the New Testament fires that only cleanse, and purify, and refine. Once we understand this difference, then we'll be able to see how Peter is rightly applying these Old Covenant Scriptures in his New Covenant context. And once we understand this difference, how glad we will be to know that by God's mercy and grace, we experience the fires of God's holy judgments only as the faithful people of the New Covenant and never as the disobedient people of the Old.

“For it is time for judgment to start from the house of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” In other words, if the fires of the final judgment are already burning in the church, purging away the dross and refining and purifying God's people, what will be the outcome when that same fire spreads to those who have refused to obey the Gospel of God? (cf. 1 Pet. 2:7-8; 3:1) Peter's almost certainly thinking, here, of Malachi's prophecy:

- Malachi 3:1–5; 4:1 (cf. Zech. 13:7-9) — Behold, I send my messenger [John the Baptist], and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple [Christ]; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a

refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem [of God's New Covenant people] will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. Then [when the refining work is done] I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts... For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

What Peter wants us to discern and understand is that the prophecy of Malachi is now being fulfilled. The Lord has come to His temple, and we are that temple. And He has come as a refiner and purifier of silver, purifying the Levites who serve in his temple so that they will bring offerings in righteousness that are wholly acceptable to the Lord. Remember what Peter said in chapter two:

- **1 Peter 2:4–5** — As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a **spiritual house** [*oikos*; cf. **4:17**], to be a **holy priesthood**, to **offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ**.

The Lord has come to His temple, and the fire of the final judgment is already burning there. The persecution and sufferings of God's people are not ultimately the work of men, but the refining eschatological (end-times) fire of God's holy presence who lives now here, among us. How could we ever be surprised, then, at the burning fire when it comes upon us to test us, as though something strange were happening to us? Can you see, now, why we should embrace this persecution and suffering at any and all costs? One day this same fire of God's judgment will spread beyond the house of God, and then "all the arrogant and all evildoers [all who do not obey the Gospel of God] will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

"It is time for judgment to start from the house of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ..."

V. 1 Peter 4:18 — And "If the righteous is saved only with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Peter's quoting almost word for word, here, from his Greek translation of Proverbs 11:31,[†] and once again, he's applying an Old Covenant verse in the light of New Covenant realities. Peter isn't saying that it's difficult for God to save his holy people. What he's saying is that for God's people—for us—the path to our final salvation is often hard and filled with difficulties – with the persecutions and sufferings that are the result of living as God's holy people in a foreign land. Jesus said:

[†] **Proverbs 11:31** — ει ὁ μὲν δίκαιος μόλις σώζεται, ὁ ἀσεβῆς καὶ ἁμαρτωλὸς ποῦ φανεῖται
1 Peter 4:18 — καὶ εἰ ὁ δίκαιος μόλις σώζεται, ὁ ἀσεβῆς καὶ ἁμαρτωλὸς ποῦ φανεῖται

- Matthew 7:13–14 — 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. For the gate is narrow and **the way is hard** that leads to life, and those who find it are few.
- Acts 14:21–22 — When [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that **through many tribulations** we must enter the kingdom of God.

But if God’s holy and righteous people only enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations, then what will become of everyone else?—What will become of the ungodly and the sinner? When the fire that’s burning even now in the house of God, refining and purifying God’s people— when this same fire spreads to the world outside, what will the result be? Peter’s point isn’t that we should rejoice in this result, but that we should all shudder to think of it. On the one hand, we must make sure that we are not compromising or conforming in order to avoid the fire. Because in that case, the fire will only spread to us later and then the result of that fire will be wholly different than it would have otherwise been. On the other hand, we should all rejoice to know that we experience the fires of God’s holy judgments *now* not as death and destruction, but as purification; we are not consumed in the fires of God’s judgment, but only proved and refined and made fit for everlasting life in His presence. Knowing and truly discerning these things is the key to joyfully persevering in persecutions and sufferings in this world. And so Peter concludes:

VI. 1 Peter 4:19 — THEREFORE let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Brothers and sisters, how good it is to know that any persecutions and any sufferings we might ever endure for the name of Christ can only be “according to God’s will” (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6; 2:15; 3:17; 4:2) – the God who Peter says has also called us to His own eternal glory in Christ. (1 Pet. 5:10) How good it is to know that as the “Creator” of all things, God is sovereign over this whole world, and this sovereign Creator God is always “faithful” to us. How good it is to know that we can confidently, wholeheartedly, and unreservedly entrust our souls—our whole selves—to Him for His safekeeping (cf. 1 Pet. 2:23; Lk. 23:46; Acts 14:23; 20:32), while we simply persevere in living the good (and holy) lives that He has called us to live in this world.