

# THE PURIFYING PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

From 1 Peter 4:12-18

## INTRODUCTION

1. Illustration: It's hard getting ready for important things. In fact I'd say there's a direct relationship between the importance of an even and the difficulty required in its preparation [vocation, marriage ceremony, sermons]
2. Transition: It's a fact of life that good things require difficulty.
3. Proposition: **God is purifying His Church through suffering; therefore, entrust your souls to a faithful Creator while doing what is right.**

## BODY

Peter begins his final major section of this letter by making an affectionate appeal: "Beloved, do not be surprised." Unsurprisingly, this passage relates to the nature of Christian suffering – something the entirety of 1 Peter deals with in one degree or another. What makes this passage unique, however, is its perspective on Christian suffering. Specifically, that God uses suffering as a means to purify His church. In verses 12-18 he unpacks this idea by telling us (1) how He's purifying us, (2) why He's purifying us, and (3) the big picture behind His work of purification – all the while the HS, through Peter, invites the 'beloved' saints of God to entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.

[General suffering vs. Persecution] – Though persecution is a particular kind of suffering and is in view in this passage, 'general' suffering has a similar role in the Christian life because it too is an opportunity to entrust our situation to God. How we suffer (whether it's by the hand of God or at the hands of our enemies) reveals who we are and whose we are.

In some ways, I believe how handle 'general' suffering is indicative of how we'll handle persecution. And although Peter has a particular kind of suffering in mind, God's purifying purpose is the same for both 'general' suffering and persecution.

### a. How is God purifying his Church?

By sending a fiery ordeal: "Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal among you" – Though there are a few, rare occasions in the early church where Christians were persecuted to the extent of being lit on fire;

the 'fiery ordeal' in verse 12 is not likely one of those. Instead, the phrase reaches back to chapter one, verse seven:

*The proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even **though tested by fire**, may be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*

What's the idea? The fiery ordeal (or test) is a picture of how God refines the faith of his people. In the same way that gold when heated to a very high temperature is made pure, so too, our faith when put to the test is similarly made pure.

This fiery ordeal is not pleasant, but it is good.

Often order our life in such a way so as maximize its pleasantness. [Amazon Prime, Disney+, DriveThrus, Walmart pick up]. None of these are bad BUT they can condition us to *expect* comfort in every aspect of our lives – our faith included. And yet this is NOT how our faith is built and it is NOT how God is purifying his church.

God is purifying his Church through fire, through hardship, through persecution. In fact, 'soft' persecution is exactly what Peter has in mind in this passage:

*(v. 14) If you are reviled for the name of Christ*

*(v. 16) If anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed*

Being weird, being name-called, scoffed at, shamed are not the worst things that could happen to you. And yet in some ways they can be more damaging *because* of their subtlety and persistence. And yet we're told, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing."

The testing in view here is not one in which the outcome is uncertain. I've been in school long enough to have taken plenty of tests where the outcome was fare from certain. There is no question as to the outcome: God will have a pure bride. The testing is the *process* by which God accomplishes the purification of His Church [testing of gold by fire]. There is no question whether the dross will be separated – the question is which parts are dross and which parts are gold!

Individually, each one of us needs God to test us in order to identify the faithless dross in our lives. Corporately, the Church needs God to test her and separate the chaff from the wheat.

So don't be surprised, Trinity, when God tests you. It's not a strange thing; if you're in Christ, it's for your good!

God is at work purifying the Church through fiery testing.

## **b. What's the goal of purification?**

There are actually two goals: present blessing and future joy. Peter highlights the latter before discussing the former:

*But to the degree that you share in the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation* (v.13)

God loves to see you happy. Did you know that? Have you considered that before? There are few things that are more satisfying as a father than seeing my children happy – especially when their joy is in things that are worth rejoicing in (success of a sibling, God answering prayer).

If we, as fallen fathers and mothers, are committed to the joy of our children, how much more committed do you think our perfect Heavenly Father is our joy? So committed, He is working to remove every impurity from our lives so our joy in Him can be complete at his appearing! There is no joy that can compete with the fullness of God in the face of Jesus. None! It's hard for us to believe this sometimes because our vision, our judgment is so messed up. It's like we need help; intense help – fiery ordeal or something.

How can our joy be complete in Jesus if we still cling to the things of this world? How can our joy be complete in Jesus if we love the praise of men? How can our joy be complete if we keep secret loyalties to wealth, comfort, power, ease, Disney+? Indeed our future (and present) joy cannot be complete when parts of us still cling to these things.

That's why God sends fiery ordeals: it's not for our pain; it's not for our sorrow; He sends it for our future joy. Note here that our future joy is conditioned on how we receive the trials today.

*Keep on rejoicing SO THAT...*

Meeting the sufferings of this age with drudgery and despair will keep us from the joy of heaven. Joyless suffering is not Christian suffering. If there's

no joy in sharing with Christ in this life, there will be no joy in sharing with Christ in the next.

This thought may seem overwhelming (especially when hear about some of the horrific persecution that's happening in Africa and the ME), but know that there's grace for every season and grace for every trial. The hard part is continuously availing ourselves of the grace God has for us each and every day.

God sends fiery ordeals, not for pain or sorrow, but our future joy. He also sends it for our present blessing.

*If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* (v. 14)

Being mocked, reviled, made fun of, maligned may seem like cursing, but when it's done because of our devotion to Jesus, it's blessing. How can this be? Because when we are content with the curses of men, it demonstrates that the same Spirit that rested upon and empowered Jesus, rests upon and empowers us! Don't be deceived: the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a sweeter blessing than any compliment your boss, co-worker, or family member give you. If the curses of men are what it takes to prove (or bear out) the favor of God in our lives, let us be accused so we might share in the sufferings of Christ!

Before going on to cue us in to the bigger picture behind God's work of purification, Peter makes an important disclaimer:

*Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;*

We've seen Peter issue similar warnings:

*What credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience* (2:20)

*It is better... that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong* (3:17)

The idea is the same: our suffering is no longer 'Christian' when our suffering is the result of our sin. The only thing that our suffering bears witness to is *our sin* rather than Christ.

It is shameful to suffer for sin. It is *not* shameful, however, to suffer for the name of Christ.

*But if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (v. 16)*

The term 'Christian' was originally coined as a pejorative (insult) in Antioch. And yet, it's in 'this' name that we are called to glorify God. We are called to make God look good as an individual of a disrespected, disregarded, unrefined minority. It can be a hard thing to bear the title 'Christian' – or worse yet, 'conservative evangelical Christian'

And yet we are called to do everything we can to make God look good while bearing whatever reproach that comes from following Jesus and taking His Word seriously.

### c. What's the bigger picture behind God's work of purification?

*For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God*

To help us make sense of this verse, allow me to read an excerpt from Malachi 3:

The OT in Mal. 8 and Ezekiel 9 anticipate a time when God would come first to his temple to 'clean house'. His coming judgment would not be one of condemnation but purification. What does this mean for 1 Peter 4? It means that the phenomena of Christian suffering – specifically persecution – is the fulfillment of Malachi 3. The last days are upon us (they have been since the resurrection). Consequently, the judgment of God is also here. Yes, its final iteration is yet future, but there's also a sense in which it is taking place now in God's house.

Christian suffering in this life may be bad, but it's nothing compared to the eternal suffering in store for unrepentant.

*And if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

Note how Peter describes those outside the household of God: "who do not obey the gospel of God." Faith and obedience always go together. We may be saved by our faith, but we will be judged by our works/our obedience. Because it is by our obedience (or lack thereof) that every

man, woman, and child (professing Christian or not) will be judged on the last day. Peter goes on:

*And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?*

Peter underscores the principle behind his previous point by loosely quoting Proverbs 11:31. God's deliverance of His saints will involve suffering at some level. But this suffering is purposeful as it refines us and makes us ready to rejoice fully at Christ's return. The same cannot be said of the wicked. One commentator sums up vv. 17-18 well:

*Suffering may be difficult now, but by participating in the pain of following Christ, believers escape the condemnation coming upon the wicked.<sup>1</sup>*

No matter how you cut it, suffering is inescapable. Either we suffer now in service to Christ, or we suffer for eternity, separated from Christ.

### CONCLUSION/APPLICATION

In light of all these things, Peter concludes:

*Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (v. 18)*

When we suffer for the name of Christ, we shouldn't be surprised. Christian suffering is part of God's plan to purify His bride for the day of Christ's return. Rather, we are to 'entrust our souls' to a faithful Creator.

What does it mean to 'entrust our souls'? Total surrender to the plans and purposes of God. Doing so empowers us to rejoice and glorify God in our sufferings.

Have you entrusted your soul to the living, faithful, creator God? The Judgment has already begun. God invites you to submit yourself to Him through Jesus. Yes, following Jesus is costly, but make no mistake: following the passions of the flesh has far greater consequences.

Christian, do not be surprised or discouraged by the persecution in this world. Do not be surprised or discouraged when the Lord sovereignly places

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 229.

suffering in your life. Yes it hurts, but it is not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed (Rom. 8:18).

1. Live boldly
2. Suffer gladly

**God is purifying His Church through suffering; therefore, entrust your souls to a faithful Creator while doing what is right.**