

Fiery Trials

1 Peter 4:12-16

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. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4:12-16 (ESV))

As we read these and other similar passages given within these Books of 1st and 2nd Peter, we cannot help but recognize that God has given the Apostle Peter a special message to those of us who are believers about the sufferings that are certain to come to us as we go about the ordinary days of this life, sufferings that will come to us not only from outside the church, from the raucous unbelievers who battle against Christianity with every means available to them, through the media, through government legislation and through the courts. But also, and unfortunately so, "sufferings" will come at us from inside the church, and not just from those "wanna-be" Christians who somehow worm their way into our congregations and spread false teachings, but even also from sincerely devoted brethren who sit next to us in the pews.

And then also, and most important, there are other "sufferings", "special sufferings", sufferings that God Himself brings to us, sufferings that are part of His special "plan". Note here the words that God chose to use, "fiery trials". He could have used other similarly descriptive words, but He deliberately chose these, "fiery trials".

The Bible Commentator, Matthew Henry, has this to say to believers as we encounter such "fiery trials" and suffering. He tells us,

Even though the sufferings be sharp and fiery, yet those "fiery trials" are designed only to try, not to ruin us, (to test) our sincerity, our strength, our patience, and our trust in God. Instead of being surprised by the "fiery trials", Christians ought rather to rejoice under their sufferings, because theirs may properly be called Christ's sufferings. They are of the same kind, and for the same cause, that Christ suffered; they make us conformable to him.

Over my years of reading these scriptures, I have come to appreciate that God is very intentional in His use of words. Too often, we and the people around us are careless with words. And that has been so in most every generation, but it is especially so with

our generation. Words and the use of them seem to change and ebb and flow really often, causing misunderstanding to abound.

I remind us of that because if we attempt to apply a 21st century mindset to some of these words of scripture, we will surely go astray in our understanding.

Here in our text, God chose a very special word that is here translated as “fiery trials”, a word not often used in these scriptures. And left to stand alone in its simple English translation, it’s real meaning can lose some of its intensity. It is the Greek word “pyrosis”, a special word intended to convey a condition of a very intense fire, but not just any fire, a fire that has a very intentional purpose, one with intense heat that is applied during the “smelting process” when metals are being heated with extreme heat in order to burn away the extraneous dross, so that only the purest of elements remain.

This same word is used in Revelations 18 where God describes the weeping and wailing and grief that the world will experience as the great and wicked city of Babylon is going through its final destruction with burning heat. There, the intent of the use of this word is that with the intense heat applied, any and all of the confusing glamor and appeal and authority and power of that evil city will be melted away and the wickedness will be laid bare for all to see and understand.

Here in our text today, God is telling us that we are not to be surprised when similar “fiery trials” come to us, because God Himself is within those “fiery trials” and He has a “plan”.

And please also, do not fail to catch this first word “beloved”. Listen!

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. (1 Peter 4:12 (ESV))

In the word “beloved” God is telling us that we are His dearly loved sons and daughters, and He loves us, and that He doesn’t want us to be surprised with the sudden intensity and difficulty that will sweep upon us. And if we will just hold on tight to Him and trust in His “trustworthy” Hand during our suffering, His sweet and perfect love will gradually reveal itself.

And then note the words that immediately follow the “fiery trials”, the words, “to test you”.

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. (1 Peter 4:12(ESV))

The words “to test you” or “to try you” reveal God’s intent. He will use the “fiery trials” to melt away the dross that has accumulated in our hearts and minds and souls. And there are so many different forms of that “dross” that have accumulated. Our generation likes expressions such as, “the baggage” that we have acquired along our way of life, “baggage” that weighs us down and befuddles and depresses us. Another form of that dross that has “caked” all over us is all of the corrupt ideas and principles and philosophies that we have adopted and now cling to the inside of our hearts and souls, driving our emotions and arguments.

And as the “fiery trials” flame up around us, we are not to be confused by the hands that we see holding those “rods of discipline” as they strike us; or those hands that hold the match to ignite the flames. Those hands will very often be familiar hands. Some will be people that despise us and want to do us harm, people that we will want to defend against. But unfortunately, also, it will sometimes be the hands of those we love most, hands that we want to hold and adore, hands that have gone astray of God’s purposes and now blame us for their suffering.

But if we can just pause for a moment in our suffering and remind ourselves that regardless of whose hands we see holding those “rods of discipline”, the hand that is in back of all the others, the ultimate “hand” that is bringing about that “fiery heat” is the loving and grace-filled hand of God. And once we realize the presence of His Hand, then we will be able to know that though our suffering will last for a night, joy will come in the morning. And it is then that God’s hand will begin to “peels away” the layers of our dross that have accumulated from the “world, the flesh and the devil”. And it is then that purity and joy will begin to take the place of that dross.

That folks, is the “true sufferings of Christ”! And we are called to take our part in it. Listen again!

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. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:12-14 (ESV))

Too often, even when we know that God’s hand is in our suffering, the distress becomes too intense for us to embrace and rejoice in. But may I encourage us that if we will move on forward and step into that fire, and draw nearer to the Person and the Spirit of Christ, His nearness will bring peace to our troubled souls, here telling us that we will be “blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:14 (ESV))

And yes, that is so very hard for us to accept and to do and to actually embrace, especially while the pain is at its worst and the fire is at its hottest. But it is that place where the three Hebrew children were when they suddenly realized that they were able to walk freely and unaffected by the flames of that fiery furnace. How were they able to do that? It was because the very Person of Christ was walking with them in that fire.

Folks, it is the loving hand of God our Father that is at work in these “fiery trials”, disciplining you and me, His beloved “sons” and “daughters”. Yes, the forging hammer is painful, but there really is no other way to shape us into the “sons” and “daughters” we really need to be. As we are told in Hebrews 12,

⁵ . . . have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:5-8,11 (ESV))

Loving words from a loving Father to His beloved children.

And look at the words of verse 13 of our text! They are so very important for our understanding . . .

¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:13 (ESV))

These words telling us that we are to “share in Christ’s sufferings” remind me of another of my favorite passages in these scriptures, found in Philippians 3. Listen to the similar wording!

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV))

There is so much mystery involved in the truths of God. And too often you and I can go through most all the days of our lives, reading words like these but never quite grabbing hold of their real meaning. But here, God is telling us that “sharing in the sufferings of

Christ” opens our hearts and minds to where we can begin to know, to understand, to sense, to feel His “truth” at a whole other level.

Remember, that this word “know” does not mean simple intellectual knowledge. This kind of “knowing” is experiential, it is felt at the “heart” and the “soul” level. It is “intimate understanding”, the kind of “intimate understanding” that is shared by a loving husband and wife as they really come to “know” each other. And that is the actual experience that the Spirit of Christ will share with our souls.

Here in these words of scripture, the special power that comes out of our sharing in Christ’s sufferings is not only the transforming power that it takes to bring about our initial salvation, it is also the transforming power that takes place in the daily sanctifying events of life, some of which are the “fiery trials” spoken about here, and the suffering that those “fiery trials” bring to us. This is one of the mysteries that most Christians seem to fail to grasp as they experience “fiery trials” in their lives.

Folks, though we may not really like God’s methodology of our having to “suffer”. It is what is necessary! It is through “sufferings” that our hearts and minds and souls are opened up to Spiritual understanding. Listen to these words of Romans 5!

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:1-5 (NIV))

Are you able to see this reasoning within these words? This is “Precept upon Precept”! It is through the sufferings of Christ that our souls are saved, but there is so much more yet to be done within our hearts and souls. We must be sanctified and set apart for God’s plans and purposes. And sanctification seems never an easy path for us to walk. Most all the time it requires suffering, those sanctifying flames of “fiery trials” as the dross is melted away from our troubled souls and we become instruments of a Holy God, human images cast into the crucible of “fiery trials” and transformed into the image of Christ, the power of Christ’s death and resurrection killing out sin from within us, and raising us up to newness of life.

I’ll close with one last “Precept upon Precept”, this same truth about sufferings and “fiery trials”, this time from the Lord’s brother, James.

James 1, beginning in verse 2,

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,
³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.
⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4 (NIV))