

Week 21 - How To Handle Trials - 1Peter 4:12-19

Scripture Reading: Malachi 3:1-5

Introduction

What do you do when you do everything right only to have everything go wrong?

Peter's original readers must have been surprised to find themselves the targets of abuse at the hands of their former friends

Before the trusted Christ, they were perfectly at home in their city and culture

They did everything their friends and family did and all was well

They were insiders who never faced irrational prejudice

But then they accepted the gospel and everything changed and when they determined to live as God would have them live, they became outsiders who experience isolation and personal hostility from those they had called friends

I'm pretty sure that wasn't exactly what they expected

Because, like most of us, they likely thought that turning to God would result in experiencing his favor and an easier life

And like us, they probably wondered where things had gone wrong and they may well have questioned whether being a Christ-follower was worth the pain

It's not uncommon for people to think that being a follower of Christ means cruising through Fat City on Easy Street - at least as long as you are not engaged in some form of sin and are doing what God would have you do

And one of the most difficult facts of life that most believers have to come to grips with is that being a follower of Jesus Christ doesn't make one immune to the trials and tribulations of life

In fact, being a faithful Christ-follower often paints a target on one's back and the closer you come to being in the center of God's will often means that you are also closer to the bullseye of suffering [target.png]

In the section of the letter before us this morning, Peter turns to the theme of suffering once more as he informs his readers that suffering is often according to God's will

And he says that Christ-follower should actually assume they will experience trials and that they should rejoice in their trials but that they should also consider and evaluate the trials they face and, in the end, trust God in the trials

Compared to Peter's original audience the trials we face may seem to be so minor as to be insignificant

After all, in Peter's day Nero was having Christians covered with tar and burned at the stake to light his garden

The suffering that we face in this country doesn't even begin to compare with that experienced on a daily basis by our spiritual brothers and sisters in other parts of the world

But that doesn't mean that our trials are not trying

It still bothers us when we are shunned, mocked, and maligned for our beliefs

So even if our trials don't quite match up with those of Peter's original audience we still need to hear that suffering is normal and part of the will of God for our ultimate good and that we should not be shocked by it

And we need to know how to respond to the trials we face when living for Christ

So let's turn our attention to the four truths that Peter presents in this section of his letter and see what we can learn from them so that we can apply them to our lives

Please join me in 1Peter 4 and follow along as I read verses 12-19 [**1Peter 4:12-19**]

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. 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 insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

The first truth we see is that:

I. We should assume trials

We should anticipate and expect that, at some point, we are going to suffer in some way for Christ

When difficulties come our way, we shouldn't think that something unusual or strange is happening

I find it interesting that Peter refers to trials as "fiery" in light of what Nero was doing to Christians

It emphasizes the fact that trials can at times be quite intense but there is another meaning that I believe is more in line with what Peter is emphasizing here

We saw that meaning in our Scripture reading this morning where Malachi wrote of the "refiner's fire" which burns off the impurities in a sample of precious metal making it more pure

Then we have to consider the purpose of the "fiery trial" is to "test" the believer

To test means to try to learn the nature or character of something by submitting it to thorough and extensive testing

Those two ideas suggest that God means for the "fiery trial" we encounter to show us how and what we are and to purify and strengthen us

That is a common theme in Scripture as we see in **Isaiah 48:10** where God says:

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

Psalms 66:10 also has the psalmist declaring:

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

And Job declares in **Job 23:10**:

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.

We like to think that we have it all together and we don't always see our flaws as God does

But oftentimes just as flaws and cracks in metals don't show up until put to the test, we don't know how we are until we are faced with a test and the test reveals what was previously hidden to our eyes

But when we see those defects we are able to allow God to work on them so as to remove them from our lives

All the careful and considerate living possible will not prevent trials because there are always flaws to work on

And Peter wants his readers to understand that God's purpose behind the fiery trials is good because they enable them to grow stronger in faith and to grow to be more like his Son [**Romans 8:29**]

Therefore, trials are not strange - they are a normal part of the life of a Christ-follower that we should expect and anticipate

But then Peter goes on to say something that is somewhat surprising in verse 13 - that:

II. We should rejoice in our trials

I don't know about you but this seems to be going a bit far

To expect and even endure our trials seems doable even if it may be difficult

But in verse 13 [**1Peter 4:13**] don't think it's strange that you suffer

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings...

Not only are we to not be thrown off balance by the trials we face but we are to be happy about suffering

A key word we need to not overlook because it helps make rejoicing while suffering possible is the word - insofar

Insofar means "to the degree" or "to the extent" so Peter is saying that when you suffer as Christ suffered that should result in rejoicing

We'll look in a few minutes at the different causes of suffering as we consider how we should evaluate our trials but what Peter means here is that suffering as a Christ-follower confirms the fact that we are indeed Christ's

Union with Christ involves not only union with him in his death and resurrection as we see in **Romans 6:5**

It also means being united with him in the whole pattern of his life, which includes his suffering for righteousness

In **John 15:18-20**, Jesus told his disciples:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

As I said earlier in my introduction, Peter's original audience was perfectly at home in their world until they came to Christ

But as they began to identify more closely with Christ, they began to suffer persecution of the kind that Jesus faced while he was on the earth making their suffering and indication of their identification with him

When we belong to Christ, we experience a real union with him and we tend to become like the people with whom we're closely united

Have you ever noticed how husbands and wives begin to look and act alike after they have been married a long time?

I know for a fact that Kathy and I have rubbed off on each other in our almost 43 years of marriage

That's simply the nature of close association

Having the mind of Christ is foreign to this world and those who follow Christ can expect to suffer as Christ suffered

The Greek word behind the word "share" carries with it the implication of joint participation and mutual interest

So when we suffer for living as Christ we fellowship with him in part by suffering as he suffered

And that should be enough to cause us to rejoice but the verse continues [**1Peter 4:13**]

...that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Suffering today will lead us to even greater rejoicing when Christ returns

Sharing in Christ's suffering now means that we are on the road to sharing in his glory hereafter

Therefore, rejoicing in suffering for Christ now will pay rich dividends of rejoicing when we see him come again

"Rejoice and be glad" means literally 'rejoice with exultation'

And 'exultation' is the kind of rejoicing that is accompanied by vocalization and body movement - singing, shouting, jumping for joy, and even doing a little victory dance is what Peter is saying we will engage in here

Then in verse 14 [**1Peter 4:14**], Peter lists a specific example of suffering

The verb tense of the phrase “If you are insulted” suggests that this is an ongoing insult that continues over time

It’s a day by day wearing down of the Christ-follower

And, while the promise of rejoicing in verse 13 is a future promise, Peter here says that being continuously maligned for living like Christ results in the present blessing of a greater fullness of the Holy Spirit

In other words, the more the world attacks us and the more we endure, the more God’s attributes will shine through us and the more the world will see Christ in us

In this we see a very necessary cycle

I don’t know about you, but my natural tendency is to avoid pain

Ever since I realized that touching a hot stove resulted in a painful burn I have avoided touching hot stoves

So I need the Holy Spirit and his power if I am going to rejoice in my trials

Let’s be honest, I need the Holy Spirit to simply endure the trial and to keep from looking for a way to escape it

So it’s a very good thing to know that as we endure we receive more of the Holy Spirit’s activity in our lives enabling us to endure further to a greater gain of the Holy Spirit

And that’s a very real reason to rejoice in our trials

But, and here is a sobering thought, this doesn’t count for all the trials and persecutions we might face

And that means:

III. We should evaluate our trials

People suffer in this life for a variety of reasons

First, and most obviously, we suffer because we live in a fallen world

A great number of the trials we face as Christ-followers is not because of anyone doing evil - it simply is the way of this fallen creation we are sojourning in

Second, we suffer because of sin

On the one hand we suffer because the world is full of sinners

That means we have to endure leaders, teachers, and bosses who are at best lazy, careless, inept, or unfair and at worst are malicious, oppressive, and abusive

But we also suffer the natural consequences of our own sins because even sin that is confessed, repented, and forgiven by God sometimes has consequences that we cannot avoid

Third, we see in the Bible that there is the involuntary suffering that comes from the discipline of our loving God

The author of Hebrews writes about this type of suffering in **Hebrews 12:7-11** where he writes:

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? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 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.

But the kind of suffering that Peter is referring to in the passage before is the **fourth** kind of suffering

The suffering that comes from identification with Christ and living a life that is pleasing to God

This is voluntary suffering that a person knowingly brings about by living like Christ and willingly endures in the name of Christ so as to bring God glory

Not every kind of suffering results in the blessings Peter has mentioned - some suffering is deserved such as the suffering that is the result of criminal acts

And Peter goes on in verse 15 to list four specific causes of suffering that would not be counted as righteous suffering that will result in blessing [1Peter 4:15] and they all sound reasonable - until we really consider them

First, he says not to suffer as a **murderer** - okay, that's easy. Right?

What about if we look at Jesus teaching about murder and realize that it also includes displays of unrighteous anger, resentments, harsh judgments, scorning, despising, and belittling others?

Next he says not to suffer as a **thief** and that means we are to also not be guilty of envy or greed, unpaid debts or waste of resources

"**Evildoer**" is a kind of catch-all phrase referring to anyone who works evil of any kind and we can see how we could easily suffer for any of these first three even if we avoid the specific sin named

But the one that might be most problematic is the last one on the list where Peter says don't suffer as a "**meddler**"

The Greek word translated as "meddler" is a compound word made up of the words *allogrios* which means "belonging to another" and *episkopos* which means "overseer"

A meddler then is someone who has his eyes set on something that belongs to someone else or one who busies himself in the affairs of others in an unwarranted manner

Meddlers interfere - they take on roles that are not theirs to take and give unsolicited and unwanted opinions

How many of you like it when someone sticks their nose into your business?

If a child is misbehaving in a store, how many parents do you think would welcome a word of advice on child-rearing from the other shoppers or a clerk in the store?

No one gladly listens to a meddler and most people are irritated by them

It's entirely possible that some of Peter's original audience were meddling

Having been rescued from the pagan culture surrounding them, they might well have allowed their zeal for the gospel to override their sense and earned the disapproval of their neighbors

Those who have been reformed can easily get under the skin of those who are still involved in the activities they have been reformed from as they begin to proselytize those they left behind

We are sojourners here - exiles in a foreign land - sheep among wolves as **Matthew 10:16** puts it

So, since we are on foreign soil that can be hazardous to us, we need to follow the admonition that follows in that verse and be *wise as serpents and innocent [or harmless] as doves*

God disapproves when we violate reasonable social standards and he won't bless tactlessness or folly even when they are somehow connected to evangelism

I once worked with a young man at Caterpillar many years ago who was zealous for evangelism

He was so zealous that he often talked about Christ with his fellow workers when he should have been working to the point that he was often in trouble for not doing his job and for keeping others from doing theirs

Although he may well have felt like he was enduring persecution for the sake of Christ, he had no right to claim it because he was stealing from our employer and meddling where he shouldn't have

The same is true when we chastise and obnoxiously correct those we see doing what they ought not to do

Some rejection and wrath is earned and we should expect to suffer when we cross into meddling where our words aren't wanted

And when we freely share unsolicited or pointed opinions and people disagree with us and criticize us using harsh language we don't get to label it persecution but must chalk it up as the predictable consequence of sharp debate
 But, as verse 16 points out, we should not be ashamed when people actually do persecute us for Christ
 Instead, we should consider that persecution a badge of honor as we proudly bear the name of Christ

Then verses 17-18 introduce an idea that may seem a bit awkward when we first read it [**1Peter 4:17-18**]

For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

What these verses do is place our suffering within an eternal context

Judgment doesn't necessarily mean 'condemnation' but is a broader term which can refer to an evaluation that results in good and bad outcomes - a judgment that results in approval or discipline but not condemnation

And the picture Peter presents is that God has begun evaluating, or judging, within the church, and will later move outward to judge those outside

Paul spoke to this in 1Corinthians 11:32 where he wrote -

But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

God's refining fire of judgment leaves no one untouched and untested

However, Christ-followers are being purified and strengthened by it as their sins are eliminated as trust in God and holiness of life continue to grow

So, those who follow Christ should evaluate themselves and their suffering making sure it isn't related to some personal sin and then strive to do what is right and maintain moral purity in their lives enduring the suffering that it may bring

And then, finally,

IV. We should trust God in our trials

In a sense, verse 19 sums up the teaching of Peter's entire letter [**1Peter 4:19**]

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Christ-followers don't suffer accidentally or because of the irresistible forces of blind fate

We shouldn't have a "stuff happens" mentality when it comes to our suffering because we suffer according to God's will

And this is especially true when we suffer for the sake of righteousness

And while this may sound harsh it really is comforting to know that everything we suffer has a purpose and our suffering is intentioned by God to purify and strengthen us

God is working in our suffering and our suffering has God-ordained limits in its content, its intensity, and its duration

And through it all, we are not alone but can depend on the care of our faithful Creator who has promised never to leave us or forsake us [**Hebrews 13:5-6**]

Notice that Peter doesn't command us to be faithful through our suffering - he reminds us that God is faithful

We can confidently and comfortably entrust ourselves to God's care because even if our bodies are destroyed our souls will continue in God's presence putting the whole question of temporary suffering in the proper perspective

Consider the account of the faithful Christ-follower Stephen who became the first martyr of the church from Acts 7

As he was being stoned to death for his faith he looked to heaven and called out "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"

There may be a time to flee a place to avoid persecution but we must never abandon our faith in our Lord

Conclusion

If we are living for Christ we should assume that we will face trials from the world because our lifestyle is foreign to them

But we can go beyond expecting to suffer and actually rejoice in our suffering for Christ when we recognize that God is in control of it and purposefully using it to bring us closer to him as we increase in likeness to his Son

But, when trials and suffering overtake us, we need to be swift to examine ourselves to check its cause, confessing any known sin and repenting of it as we submit to the discipline of the Lord

Knowing that through it all, we can trust ourselves completely to God's sovereign and faithful hand as we continue to do good

That's how a Christ-follower should handle trials

Let's pray

Malachi 3:1-5 (page 802)

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; 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 will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

“Then 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.