

When You Face a Fiery Ordeal

(1 Peter 4)

INTRODUCTION

All of us occasionally experience a time of crisis. We have an accident, we take a final exam, we get sick, or a loved one dies. We lose a job, or maybe a friend or a mate proves unfaithful. What do we do then?

The Christians to whom Peter wrote were facing an even more difficult crisis than these. They were being persecuted because of their faith. Peter wrote: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, which cometh upon you to prove you, as though a strange thing happened unto you" (4:12). Notice the present tense: ". . . which *cometh* upon you." The idea is that the fiery trial was happening to them *then*, at the time Peter was writing.

Two other verses in the fourth chapter also suggest that a time of crisis was already there and a greater crisis was impending. Verse 17 says, "For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?" Notice again the present tense: ". . . the time *is come*." The church was being "judged" or "tried"! The Greek word for *time* in verse 17 is *kairos*. It does not just mean chronological time; it means "fitting season." So Peter said in this verse that the "fitting season" for judgment had arrived.

Verse 7 says, "The end of all things is at hand." It is possible that Peter here is speaking of the end of the world, the coming of Christ, and the Day of Judgment. If so, he was saying, in effect, "Everything that must happen before Christ returns has happened. Therefore, He could come at any time." Whether or not this is the way early Christians understood this expression, we today should believe that even now—nineteen hundred years later—the end of the world is "at hand" and will continue to be "at hand" or "near" even if Christ should delay His return another nineteen hundred years.

It is more likely, however, that Peter was referring to the time of the "fiery ordeal" and to the time of "judgment" when he spoke of "the end of all things." J. W. Roberts said, "The Hebrew concept of 'judgment' sees all calamities and catastrophes as 'the day of the Lord,' 'the end,' 'the last day,' 'the judgment.'"¹ It seems likely that Peter used this Jewish concept to re-emphasize the lesson that a fiery ordeal had begun, the trial or judgment of Christians was proceeding, and this persecution was destined to get worse; therefore, he said, "The end of all things"—increasing trouble and tribulation and persecution and suffering—is near.

Three times in one chapter his readers are warned of present and coming trouble: in verse 12, when he spoke of a "fiery ordeal"; in verse 17, when he said that it is time for judgment to begin with the church; and in verse 7, when he said that the time of the end is near.

To what time did Peter refer? Christians for many years did not experience persecution from the Roman government. When they were persecuted, it was generally by the Jews. But the situation changed when Nero was emperor. Nero was accused of setting fire to Rome. A Roman historian named Tacitus recorded what happened afterwards:

Nero, to get rid of this report, fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their

deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed (*Annals xv. 44*).²

Asia Minor, where the Christians lived to whom Peter wrote, was far from Rome. Yet the persecution initiated by the emperor would probably have been pursued to some degree by Roman officials in other parts of the empire. The persecution in Asia Minor may not have been as severe as that in Rome, but it must have been sufficiently severe to cause Peter to write a letter to Christians to help them overcome the suffering they faced in the days of Nero's persecution.

What help did Peter offer them in those days of trial? How could they face their fiery ordeal? Even though we are not suffering because of our faith, as they were; we can probably learn something from Peter's advice which will help us face our own crises. To put it another way, let Peter tell you how to act when you face *your* fiery ordeal.

I. KEEP YOUR MIND ON JESUS (4:1-6)

Peter's first admonition in 4:1-6 was to "arm ye yourselves also with the same mind" since Christ "suffered in the flesh" (v. 1). To think about Christ and His suffering will arm us, or prepare us, for suffering in at least three ways:

It will remind us that Christ suffered. If the only One who was ever sinless, the very Son of God Himself, had to suffer, why should it surprise us that we must suffer?

It will help us react properly when we suffer. When we think about Christ's suffering, we remember that He refused to sin when He was put to death unjustly. Remembering that will help us accept suffering without retaliating or bearing grudges against our tormentors.

It will help us live righteously in spite of suffering. Peter said, "He that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that ye no longer should live the rest of your time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God" (vv. 1, 2). Peter

seemed to be saying that if we suffer and still remain faithful, it strengthens us, and we can afterwards better overcome other temptations to sin. (See James 1:2-4.)

Peter then elaborated on this thought by specifying that we should not sin as we once did, or as non-Christians do. He said that non-Christians (Gentiles) enjoyed their sinning. They liked "lasciviousness, lusts, winebibbings, revellings, carousings, and abominable idolatries" (v. 3). They liked wild parties, getting drunk, dancing, sexual perversion, exhibitionism—all in connection with their worship of idols.³ They liked sinning, and they were surprised when their friends refused to continue sinning with them after those friends became Christians. So, Peter said, they were "speaking evil of you" (v. 4). Today, they might make fun of you, or call you names.

Perhaps that is tragic, but there is something even more tragic: That is when people become Christians, but *do not* change their lives—when they continue to participate with their friends in the old life of sin! That is *really* tragic!

Peter then said that those who torment Christians will *not* get away with it; rather they "shall give account to him that is ready to judge the living and the dead" (v. 5). In other words, he was saying, "Do not worry about your persecutors; God will take care of them!"

The next verse, verse 6, is difficult, for it is hard to see how it fits into the context. When Peter said, "For this is why the gospel was preached to the dead" (RSV) or "For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead" (KJV), perhaps he was explaining why it is fair for God to judge everyone, both the living and the dead. The gospel was preached to the dead as it was preached to them while they were still alive. Therefore, though they might be "judged indeed according to men in the flesh," they might still "live according to God in the spirit" or be saved. So they are without excuse, and God can justly condemn the wicked. The thought then is this: *The gospel has been preached because judgment is coming, in order that it might be evident that God's judgments are fair.*

Remembering Christ, then, will help us accept suffering and—and this is more important—live righteously when we suffer.

II. REMAIN SANE AND SOBER (4:7)

Peter put it this way: “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore of sound mind, and be sober unto prayer” (4:7).

What did Peter mean? Other versions say we should be “calm, self-controlled men of prayer” (Phillips), or we should “lead an ordered and sober life, given to prayer” (NEB), or we should “be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer” (NASB). The idea is that we should not face life with levity and frivolity; we should not make decisions lightly or act without thinking of the consequences. One poet said: “Life is real, life is earnest, and the grave is not the goal.” Life is not a continuous picnic, not just one long party. If we are to meet problems successfully, we have to do it with calm reasoning and sober judgment.

But that is not all. We are to be “sane and sober” for our prayers. The need to be sensible is dictated by the need to pray. Perhaps prayer—effective, fervent prayer—is even more important than sound and sober judgment when it comes to facing a crisis! Those Christians were to face persecution with a sober mind *and* with prayer. So should we.

III. LOVE ONE ANOTHER (4:7-12)

According to Peter in 4:7-12, love for one another is essential. It is, in fact, most essential. It is “above all.” When Christians in the first century faced trials, “above all” they needed to stick together; they needed to love one another. Why? Because, for one thing, it was one thing which could not be taken from them. The authorities might confiscate their property, deprive them of their livelihood, even rob them of their lives. But they could not destroy the bond of love that bound Christians together. For another thing, without love for one another, one Christian might deliver another into the hands of the persecutors. With love, no amount of pressure could force one to betray another. What is the lesson for us? When any one of us faces a trial, he will be more likely to “come out on top” if we truly “love one another.”

What will love for one another do?

It will cover a multitude of sins. It does so, first, in that we refuse to hold against another the sins he commits; we are merciful. Second, when we are merciful and forgive others, we are forgiven.

It will cause us to be hospitable. Hospitality then was more than just having someone over after church for a cup of coffee. It was meeting the needs of those who were poor, or those who were traveling; or it was allowing the church to meet in one’s home. We need such hospitality today; if we love one another, we will have it. “Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another.”

It will cause us to use our gifts on behalf of one another. First Peter 4:9-11 suggests that every Christian has gifts from God; that every Christian is a steward of those gifts—and, therefore, is accountable to God for how he uses them; that our gifts differ, for speaking and serving are here specified, but others are possible; that we are to use our gifts wholeheartedly; that we are to use our gifts to God’s glory; that most important, for our purposes, we are to employ our gifts “for one another” (RSV).

You have been given some gifts from God. How are you using them? Only to benefit yourself? Then you are failing to accomplish the purpose for which God blessed you with your gifts. Let us use our gifts—whatever they are—for the benefit of “one another.”

IV. HAVE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TOWARD SUFFERING (4:12-19)

Peter here made several points worthy of note about suffering. First, Christians should not be surprised when we suffer because of our faith. (See also 2 Timothy 3:12.) Second, when we suffer because of our faith we should rejoice. (See 3:13, 14.) If we do suffer because we are Christians, it at least means that our Christianity is showing. Third, when we suffer because of our faith, we should not be ashamed, but we should glorify God. To be persecuted for the Lord is a privilege, not a disgrace. Fourth, when we suffer because of our faith, we should always do right (4:19). Fifth, when we suffer because of our faith, we should entrust our souls to God (4:18). After all, what can men do to us that *really* matters, when God can and will save us eternally and will deal justly with our persecutors?

But it needs to be made clear that the suffering of which Peter spoke is *suffering because of the faith*. When he said, “If a man suffer as a Christian,” he was saying, “If one suffers *because* he is a Christian.” (See also 4:19.)

We might suffer for various reasons: our sin, our errors in judgment, sickness, natural disasters, or death of loved ones (Hebrews 9:27). Peter was *not* talking about suffering for any of these reasons. He was talking about suffering because we are Christians.

Sometimes we might think we are suffering because we are Christians, when really it is only because of our poor way of reacting to people. People may make fun of me, not because I am doing what is right but because I do what is right in the wrong way. I may act “holier-than-thou.” Along with my “goodness,” I may display a lousy, mean disposition which causes others to dislike me. Peter is *not* talking about our suffering because of our own personality problems.

Anytime there was something hard to take, one woman said, “I am just a poor little Christian martyr; that’s what I am.” If it was a hot day and she was suffering from the heat, she would sit on the front verandah, drink cold lemonade, fan herself to try to keep cool as the perspiration poured off her face, and say constantly, “I am just a poor little Christian martyr; that’s what I am.” If she burned the toast and someone complained, if she were tired after walking to town, or if she had a cold and had to blow her nose every few minutes, she would say, “I am just a poor little Christian martyr; that’s what I am.”

We may think like that too. When we take a final exam, get a parking ticket, stub a toe, or lose a scarf, we may think, “I am just a poor little Christian martyr; that’s what I am.”

But this is not necessarily so. Peter in this passage does not commend us for any and every kind of suffering, nor suggest we should rejoice regardless of the reason for our suffering. We do not qualify as “Christian martyrs”—with the blessings that suggests—anytime we suffer.

What, then, did Peter have to say to us in our situation? Most of us do *not* suffer because of the faith—at least not much. Is there any word here that will help us when we suffer for other reasons?

I believe we can use a bit of “How much more?” logic here. If we should not do wrong to those who persecute us, *how much more* should we refrain from doing wrong to those involved when we suffer for other reasons? If suffering as Christians should not surprise us, then *how much more* should we not be astonished when

we suffer in the same way that other human beings suffer? If we are to do right even when we are persecuted, *how much more* should we do right when we suffer for “natural causes”? If we are to entrust our souls to God when we are persecuted for the faith, *how much more* should we trust Him when we suffer because of sickness, accidents, or mistakes? And especially, if we should not lose our faith when we are persecuted, *how much more* should we remain true to God when we face the relatively minor stress points of life?

The Christians Peter addressed were facing a fiery ordeal of persecution and possible death. They were to “commit their souls in well-doing unto a faithful Creator.” We may face a “fiery ordeal” as well, but our “fiery ordeal” hardly compares with theirs. *How much more*, then, should *we* always “commit [our] souls in well-doing unto a faithful Creator.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us consider this question Peter asked: “For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, where shall the ungodly and sinner appear?” (4:17, 18). Probably Peter’s primary reference here was to the persecution that was coming, and not to that final judgment when the righteous and unrighteous will be separated and rewarded or punished eternally. But the question he asked is also appropriate for the final judgment: “What shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?”

Paul answered that question for us in 2 Thesalonians 1:6-9:

If so be that it is a righteous thing with God to recompense affliction to them that afflict you, . . . at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (Italics mine.)

Could anything be plainer? Christ will come “in flaming fire, rendering vengeance . . . to them that obey not the gospel . . . who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction.”

My friend, if you have not obeyed the gospel—if you have not believed in Jesus, repented of your sins, confessed your faith, and been baptized for the remission of sins—then these inspired writers say you are lost now, and will be lost eternally! That is, you will be lost *unless* you choose to respond to Christ by becoming obedi-

ent to the gospel. Will you make that decision right now?

—Coy Roper

FOOTNOTES

¹J. W. Roberts, *I and II Peter and Jude*, p. 49.

²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³*Ibid.*, p. 47.

Diagram for Chalkboard, Flannelgraph, and Overhead Projector

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“If one suffers as a Christian” . . . HOW MUCH MORE when we suffer for other reasons!

————— WHAT WILL BE THE END OF THOSE WHO DO NOT OBEY THE GOSPEL? —————

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