

“Keeping Cool When Under Fire”

1 Peter 4:12-19

A few months ago, Facts & Trends Magazine, published by LifeWay, released their 2018 update about the state of the persecuted church around the world. The title of the article I read really grabbed my attention as it simply said, **“Quarter of a Billion Christians Face Major Persecution in 2018.”** The article began by saying that somewhere around **215 million** Christians face significant levels of persecution throughout the world today, according to the latest World Watch List by Open Doors. Researchers for the organization estimate that 1 in 12 Christians live where their faith is **“illegal, forbidden, or punished.”** And consider this—during the reporting for the 2018 World Watch List, some 3,066 Christians were killed, 1,252 were abducted, 1,020 were raped or sexually harassed, and 793 churches were attacked.

Much of the violence and oppression of Christians was concentrated in several nations that dominate the top of list, especially North Korea, which has been at the top of the list for more than a decade. It is illegal to be a Christian in North Korea and Christians are often sent to labor camps or killed if they are discovered. The conditions in this country have remained the worst in the world for Christians in the past 13 years. Close behind North Korea is Afghanistan. “Never before have the top two countries been so close in incidents,” said David Curry, Open Doors USA president and CEO. “Both countries are extreme in intolerance and outright persecution of Christians in every area Open Doors monitors.”

Thirty of the 50 nations on the list saw conditions worsen for Christians since the last report. The list is designed to help the church better understand how to pray for and support persecuted believers around the world.

“After all, the World Watch List isn’t about the numbers,” he said, “but about the people these numbers represent. I hope you see their stories of victory and resilience, and—more than anything—*I hope you see the powerful kingdom work God is accomplishing in some of the most difficult countries in the world.*”

As we sit in this comfortable, climate controlled worship center this morning, we may find it hard to believe that many of our brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing something totally different. For many, their allegiance to Christ means that they are socially ostracized. They've been forsaken by family. Some have been scarred by physical torture. It all might sound so very strange to us, but the apostle Peter says that it shouldn't.

“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.”

This section at the close of the fourth chapter deals with the reality of Christian suffering. Within these verses, Peter seeks to encourage and comfort his readers in the midst of their trials. Having endured plenty of afflictions for Christ's sake in his own life, Peter was more than qualified to speak on the subject.

How were they to respond to suffering? How should we as believers react whenever we, too, face the heat?

Notice he doesn't give them answers as much as he gives them assurances. To move forward, they needed a clear perspective. The glory of God needed to eclipse the nature of their circumstances.

John Piper — *“Wimpy world views make wimpy Christians, and wimpy Christians won't survive the days ahead.”*

I want us to pay close attention to Peter's instructions here. You ought to read these verses carefully and underline each specific instruction that he gives. It is important that we not fall to pieces when we face the furnace. Instead, we're to remain calm and confident. The only way to do that is to have an enlarged view of the glory of God.

Within these verses, Peter mentions several ways for us to keep cool whenever we come under fire for our faith.

1. Suffering is to be EXPECTED (4:12-14)

“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.”

We recognize it for what it is. We won't spent much time here, because we looked at this last week. The 'fiery trial' that Peter is referring to here is one that has been brought on because of obedience to the gospel. They had been in the furnace for their faith. In fact, the word that Peter uses in the verse implies the heat of adversity.

“Fiery Trial” — *word is 'pyrosis' and speaks of an agonizing experience of burning with fire*

Their faith in Jesus Christ made these believers the target of persecution. They were being viewed differently by their society now that they had pledged their allegiance to Him.

We should never become caught off guard whenever we are targeted for our faith, but rather we should expect it. As the followers of Jesus, we should never be shocked when we are treated by the world the same way that He was.

This was the very point He made to the disciples:

John 15:18-21 — “If the world hates you, know that it 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.”

If we are embraced by the world, what does it really say?

We rejoice in it for what it does. Notice that Peter says that these trials aren't strange, but are necessary for our testing. It becomes the way that our faith is proven to be legitimate. When our faith brings us discomfort, it is a good sign that our faith is genuine.

When we hurt, it becomes easy for us to wallow in our self-pity and even question God's presence with us.

The fiery trial served as evidence that they were sharing in Christ's suffering, which meant that they would also share in His glory when He would one day be revealed. They had every reason to rejoice when they were insulted for Christ's sake because it meant that the Spirit of glory and of God rested upon their lives. (Ministry of the Holy Spirit)

In other words, when we suffer, rather than feeling sorry for ourselves, we ought to rejoice. His glory is our future!

We rejoice that His glory will one day be revealed. Suffering didn't get the best of Him, and it won't get the best of us. He isn't the great 'I Was.' He is the great 'I AM.' And were He but dust and ashes in a middle eastern tomb, then complaining would be in order. But He's not dead! He is alive and in full control, and His glory will be revealed for all to see when He comes again.

When things aren't going well, such truth often escapes our thinking. Yet when the rug gets pulled out from under us, this is the only truth we have to lean on. It is the hope that we should have been resting in all along.

Now I don't know if it is this way for you, but whenever my circumstances are comfortable, I'm very self-sufficient. My prayer life begins to dry up. Heaven doesn't occupy much of my thought life. That's why self-sufficiency is the enemy of productive faith. It is at this point that pain serves the beneficial purpose of radically reorienting my life.

Why does God allow us to face trials? Because we are so quick to forget Him. It is easy to become preoccupied with the 'stuff' of life to the extent that we take our eyes off of the Lord.

Over and over again, He uses some 'fiery trial' and painful circumstances to remind us that things in this life are only temporary, while He is eternal and everlasting.

C.S. Lewis — *"I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contentedly fallen and godless condition, absorbed in a merry meeting with my friends for the morrow or a bit of work that tickles my vanity today, a holiday or a new book, when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain threatens serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction, sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down. At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happinesses*

look like broken toys. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world and my only real treasure is Christ. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys."

That describes basic human nature. We easily forget what Peter says in these verses when everything we hold dear suddenly ignites in the incinerator of life's fiery trials. And yet God uses those trials to bring us right back to Himself.

(illus. of John the Baptist in Matthew 11)

Jesus said that of all those born of women, none had ever arisen that was greater than John. And yet when we see him in prison in Matthew 11, his thoughts are filled with doubt and turned toward himself. Most of us praise God for His goodness when all goes well and according to plan. But when we're faced with the furnace, we wonder where in the world He is.

Perhaps John began to question his situation:

- Why am I suffering for only doing what is right?
- Why hasn't Jesus inaugurated His kingdom yet?

He calls a couple of his disciples to himself and sends them off to find Jesus and ask Him the question, "Are the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?" This is the same John who earlier on the Jordan riverbank had boldly declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

But it is different when you're in the middle of a fiery trial. Watch how Jesus responds:

Matthew 11:4-6—“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

In other words, Jesus was teaching John the same lesson that you and I so desperately need when we're hurting—the Savior of yesterday is the same Savior of today and tomorrow. He never changes! (see Hebrews 13:5-8)

2. Suffering is to be EVALUATED (4:15-18)

“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?’”

Peter reminds his readers that there are both right and wrong reasons to suffer. We're blessed when we suffer for righteousness' sake, but we should never boast in our suffering whenever it is the consequences of our own poor choices.

He mentions four examples of things we can do that will cause unnecessary pain in our lives—murder, stealing, evildoing, meddling in the affairs of someone else. If you take someone else's life, there are painful consequences, and rightfully so. The same thing is true when you take something that doesn't belong to you.

“Meddling” —*sticking your nose where it doesn't belong*

The word refers to a person who interferes in things that are unrelated to his or her calling. If we aren't careful, we can drift off into personal or social causes that have very little to do with the gospel.

Chuck Swindoll — *“Peter’s instruction here is to make sure we’re not engaged in activities that not only get us off target and bring a reproach on the name of Christ, but also would cause us to miss God’s blessing and lose our reward when Christ returns.”*

A student can't claim persecution when her professor fails her because she spent more time socializing than studying for the final. Or, an employee can't claim persecution when he's fired because he took advantage of company time to counsel a co-worker. The gospel demands that we be the best students and employees, husbands and wives, citizens and neighbors, all for the glory of God.

Peter says in verse 16, “If you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but glorify God in that name.”

“Christian” — *used only three times in the NT; first used as an insult to describe the followers of Jesus*

Whenever our lives come under attack because of Jesus and His gospel, we shouldn't be ashamed of it. Perhaps as he wrote these words, Peter reflected back on his failure to identify with the name of Jesus. He had denied knowing Him three times.

Peter knew full well what it was like to deny Jesus in order to avoid suffering, and he was immediately ashamed.

Instead of being ashamed when we're criticized for Christ's sake, we are to glorify God in that name. We are to let our light so shine before others that they

see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. Inevitably, there will come a time when your values as a Christian conflicts with certain cultural values.

- Marriage/Sexuality
- Gender
- Human life
- Exclusivity of Jesus Christ

There will always be areas where Christian ethics so clash with the culture's ethics that we will endure shame, ridicule, and reproach out of obedience to God's Word. It is not a pleasant thing to be labeled and attacked. None of us want that. Yet we have no reason to be ashamed when we suffer as a Christian. Instead, we have every reason to glorify God in that name because it means that we're becoming more like Christ in our lives. Suffering reproach for Christ's sake proves that we have aligned ourselves with Him. Such was Paul's own testimony:

Philippians 3:10-11 — “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.”

To be truly joined to Christ is to become more and more like Him. We become like the people with whom we are united. (illus. of marriage to Anita)

When we suffer as Christians, it is merely preparing us for future glory. Listen to Peter's reasoning in verse 17:

“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God...”

God is working in our lives, saving us from the presence and power of sin. Though it is hard to endure and difficult to understand, we as Christians need the heat of the furnace to be purified and sanctified. Trials become tools in the hands of God to refine His own.

James 1:2-4—“Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

The point that Peter is making here is this—If God doesn’t keep His own children from the ‘fiery trial,’ what will happen to those who are lost when God’s judgment falls?

He says in verse 18, “And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’” It is a quotation from Proverbs 11:31. The idea that is being expressed is this—Christians are saved with difficulty and it is seen through suffering. The way to heaven is paved with suffering. If it is true for believers, what about unbelievers?

One of these days, the Lord Jesus Christ is coming again and will deal out retribution on an unbelieving world. Though it seems like the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer, we need to remember this is not the case.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-8—“Since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The only suffering that you and I will ever experience is what we encounter in this life—it's momentary. These present 'fiery trials' are nothing compared to the 'flaming fire' that will one day be poured out on the lost world when the Son of God returns in holy judgment. Thus, we endure by keeping the end in mind.

3. Suffering is to be ENTRUSTED (4:19)

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

As Christians, we can expect suffering in life, and we ought to evaluate the reason behind it. Last of all, Peter says that our suffering is to be entrusted to God. In the midst of life's sorrows and hurts, we must commit ourselves to One who knows best.

"Let those who suffer according to God's will..."

When we face the heat, you and I are to trust in the perfect will of God. That's the only thing that will get us through the tough times. Often, we think that a reason ought to be given. We want God to explain Himself to us.

"God, why did you take my spouse in the prime of life? Why did my child get sick and die? Why did the storm take my house? Why did the company choose to downsize and my job was the one that was eliminated? Why, why, why?"

"God, why am I being unfairly attacked after having served You all these years?"

There are dozens of events in your life about which you could ask the question, "Why?" But do you think that it would really bring comfort to your soul if all of your why's were answered? Let's just suppose that we did have an explanation for life's puzzling questions. Is that really the solution? It's very doubtful.

What child is comforted by being given an explanation as to why his toy broke?
Or why his knee is scraped by the pavement when he falls off his bicycle? My
children aren't comforted by my explanations, but by my presence.

We are not given answers. We won't find explanations. We're to have faith.

“Entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

When we suffer, we can take heart in the truth that there is a faithful Creator who
can be trusted. We must ‘entrust’ our souls’ care to Him.

“Entrust” —*to deposit something for safekeeping; same word used by Jesus
while on the cross*

**Luke 23:46—“Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into
your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”**

(It was a direct quotation from Psalm 31.)

1. *I know not why* God's wondrous grace

*To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.*

2. *I know not how* this saving faith

*To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.*

3. *I know not how* the Spirit moves,

*Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.*

4. *I know not what of good or ill
May be reserved for me,
Of weary ways or golden days,
Before His face I see.*

5. *I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noontide fair,
Nor if I walk the vale with Him,
Or meet Him in the air.*

***But I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day!***

Conclusion:

How can we ever keep our cool when we are facing the heat? Peter says that it is all a matter of perspective. To get through the fire unscathed, we need a vision of the glory of God. We can rejoice when we remember what suffering produces in our lives. We entrust our souls to our faithful Creator while doing good.

If you aren't saved, I urge you now to repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It may mean that you will be treated differently by the world. It may even mean that the cross of discipleship gets heavy. But better to suffer a little now and enter glory later than to live for your own glory now only to suffer later.

"Father, when we find ourselves in the furnace, we rejoice to know that we're never alone, for You are with us. This light and momentary affliction is producing in us a far more exceeding weight of glory. Though we face fiery trials now, as those who trust in Jesus, may we look forward in eager anticipation to heaven's glory later. Amen."