

Sermon File # 1266

Scripture Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19

Sermon Title: *The Painful Trial: Suffering for Following Christ*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and

Sermon preached at International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 23 January 2011.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end of the document.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

For information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

All Rights Reserved.

The Painful Trial: Suffering for Following Christ

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we continue to look at the message of encouragement that Peter gives to the church, scattered throughout Asia Minor, facing mounting opposition and persecution. Last Sunday we noted how Peter challenged the church to leave their former pagan way of life behind and to make the most of the remaining time of their mortal lives to be prayerful, loving and serving people (4:1-11).

In the following verses 12-19 of the 4th chapter, we'll consider the words of the Apostle of Hope regarding the painful trial we face and the suffering that will inevitably result from our following Christ as Lord. Earlier in the letter, Peter had instructed the church in living in a way that would refrain from unnecessarily offending the surrounding pagan culture, but as he nears the end of his letter, he addresses the issue of suffering that is unavoidable if we follow Christ faithfully. Possibly Roman Emperor Nero has now begun his horrific assault upon the church (Wiersbe, 112). He describes this pending and perhaps already present suffering as a painful, literally fiery, trial.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 4:12-19**.

The idea of a painful trial facing the church has seemed a bit unreal to those of us in the West, at least until recently. Especially those of us in the North American church have thought of suffering as something to be avoided at all costs. As one has said, suffering “runs counter to modern sensibilities that consider suffering and hard times to be an abnormal state of life that should be avoided if at all possible” (Jobes, 286). But now, even those of us who have lived during the church’s age of ease, realize that suffering and persecution are getting closer to home. We cannot expect this longest suffering free era in Christian history to continue indefinitely.

All we need to do is read or watch daily newscasts to see how fellow believers around the world are suffering overt persecution as never before, and the Global Day of Prayer report that the 20th Century was the worst 100 years of persecution; yet this new century is seeing an escalation in the number of martyrs, estimated to be 150,000 annually and growing. An estimated 200 million Christians live under some degree of oppression and restrictions to their living out their faith.

We also, even though living in the protected environment of governments that protect human rights and religious freedom, are beginning to sense a growing prejudice against and even hostility toward biblical, Christian faith. 1 Peter is an important letter, not just to our fellow believers in lands of aggressive persecution, but to all of us, living in these last days of mounting tribulation forewarned in Scripture (Mark 13, Matthew 24, John 15, 2 Thessalonians 2, Revelation 7, etc.).

This painful trial about which Peter speaks focuses on suffering for the faith at the hands of a hostile, fallen world. But we can include all kinds of suffering as a painful trial, which includes all difficulties that challenge our faith. Although we do not choose to suffer an illness, for example, we can choose how we respond to that suffering as a faithful follower of Christ. Whether your suffering is the difficulty you experience from enemies of the Cross or whether it’s what Satan throws at you through other difficulties, illness or pain, your painful trial is that “evil day” that will surely come, when we must be able to stand firmly in Christ (Ephesians 6:13).

I want us to notice that the painful trial we suffer for following Christ and in our life for Christ is, first of all...

Unavoidable

For Peter to assume that suffering is unavoidable for the follower of Christ demonstrates the power and profundity of his conversion. It was Simon Peter, on the heels of his great confession at Caesarea-Philippi (Matthew 16:13-20), who reacted against Jesus’ explanation of the necessity of his looming suffering and death. Jesus replied that Peter’s rejection of Jesus’ way of suffering and death was worldly-minded and was even expressive of the thinking of Satan himself (21-23). Then Jesus said that all who would come

after him must take the way of the Cross (24ff). The necessity of suffering with and for Christ didn't really "sink into" the understanding of the disciples until after Jesus' death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. Now Peter, as the Apostle of Hope, reminds the church that the painful trial is unavoidable and is...

For the genuine

Not all who are identified with the church, however, will experience the painful trial. Some who are "fair weather" members and nominal Christians will fall away when suffering, difficulty or inconvenience threaten. There were, no doubt, fewer false believers and temporary followers of Jesus in 1st Century Asia Minor than in the Western Church today. But, as we can read throughout the New Testament, especially in the Book of Hebrews, 2 Peter and 2 Corinthians, there were those who needed to be warned against falling away and to always examine the quality of their faith and commitment to Christ.

Peter says that "it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (17). In times of persecution and the painful trial and testing of our faith, true believers are being separated from the false, like the dividing of genuine wheat from the "cheat" (Matthew 13:25ff). This judgment that begins with the family of God is the process of sorting out those who are false pretenders and fickle "followers" from those who are truly Christ's (Jobes, 293).

In our Western culture, the label "Christian" is culturally acceptable and respectable, distinguishing you from being pagan or an adherent of another world religion. Here in Europe "Christian" is still used by political parties and as a cultural and traditional designation. But in the 1st Century world, "Christianos" meant "Christ's ones, or followers of Christ, and was often used in a pejorative or even accusatory way to refer to members of a suspected cult of doubtful reputation (Moo, 2130). Christ was condemned to die a shameful death on a cross, and those who followed him accepted the possibility of a similar fate.

When writing these words, how Peter must have been mindful of the temporary lapse in his faith when he denied the Lord, but then was graciously restored following his repentance. So, with the heart of a caring pastor, Peter refers to these believers as "dear friends," true brothers and sisters in Christ. The genuine are the ones who have no fear of standing before the judgement seat of Christ because their lives give evidence of his forgiving, restoring grace, and the Spirit gives them the witness of assurance (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 John 3:24).

The painful trial in fact is also evidence of the presence and work of grace in our lives and evidence of the genuineness of our faith. After giving the benediction and blessing for those who suffer hatred, exclusion, insults and rejection for his sake, Jesus pronounces woes of judgment on those who avoid suffering:

"Woe to you when men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

The painful trial is unavoidable for the genuine and...

For the godly

In this letter, Peter has differentiated between suffering for doing good and suffering for obnoxious and unacceptable behavior. He advises the church to live good lives and to be submissive to proper authorities so that the observing and critical world would not have any unnecessary reasons to oppose them (2:13-3:7). In fact, as much as possible, the church should seek to gain credibility and a hearing the message of Christ (3:13ff). And in this passage, Peter gives the extreme case for suffering for the wrong reason—as a murderer, thief or criminal (15). Although these are unthinkable they are nevertheless possible for so-called Christians, especially for those living under great duress and in desperate conditions. Peter also lists “meddling,” (“prying into other people’s affairs,” as in the *New Living Translation*), which is a more likely sin, though also one that can cause division in the fellowship or erode the credibility of one’s witness. Perhaps “meddling” could include “tactless evangelism” (Jobes, 289).

The painful trial comes to the godly. “In fact,” Paul writes, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be* (emphasis mine) persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus says, “In this world you *will have* (emphasis mine) trouble” (John 16:33). When we live in a way that identifies us with Christ as our Lord and Master, and that is a silent and shining rebuke to those who live in spiritual darkness, we can expect they will “heap abuse” on us (4:4).

The painful trial is unavoidable yet is also...

Beneficial

Peter says we are to not reluctantly expect the painful trial but are to actually rejoice in it (13). The painful trial is beneficial...

To us

These strange-sounding words sound much like those of the Apostle James, who writes, “Consider it *pure joy* (emphasis mine), my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...” (1:2a). In his Beatitudes, Jesus told us to “Rejoice and be glad” when we are insulted, persecuted and falsely accused because of our loyalty to him (Matthew 5:11f). We can embrace and joyfully welcome the fiery trial, which includes insults and various assaults on our wellbeing.

We might say that the fiery trail includes any negative experience the Lord allows to come our way. In some way God uses these experiences as his judgment of us and of our sinful condition. Although we are saved by grace and our sins have already been judged and paid for by the blood of Christ, God, who loves us supremely, nevertheless continues to judge our sinfulness and uses our suffering as a continuing process of removing our sin nature from

us. This is “divinely sent judgement to purify his people,” (Burdick, 1894). The painful trial reminds us when have died with Christ to the power of sin and also weans us from the attraction of sin. And anyone willing to suffer with Christ has decided to leave his or her former sinful conduct (4:1f. See my sermon on 16 January from 1 Peter 4:1-11, “*The Time Is Now! Leaving the Old Life and Living the New*”).

We can rejoice in the benefit to us, knowing that our suffering is drawing us closer in our fellowship with Christ, which is that for which the Apostle Paul longed (Philippians 3:10). Peter notes that we are blessed because during our suffering for Christ “the Spirit of glory and of God (“the glorious Spirit of God,” *NLT*) rests on (us)” (14). The Spirit of God gave joy to the apostles, who rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41). The Holy Spirit transformed even the countenance of Stephen as he stood accused before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6: 15), empowered his message of salvation history (7:1-53), and enabled him to see the glory of God and forgive those who stoned him to death (7:55-60).

The painful trial is beneficial in drawing us closer to Christ and also works for our eternal good. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17). This is the eternal reward, the expectation of which, Jesus says, should cause us to “rejoice and be glad” (Matthew 5:12).

The painful trial makes us keenly aware of our desperate dependence on the Holy Spirit, and as we seek the fullness of his Spirit, we are giving grace to trust and faith to see that God is with us and is at work in us for our eternal good. But the painful trial is not just about us, but is also beneficial...

To others

Peter is addressing the Body of Christ, the church community, which is sharing together the experience of suffering for the name of Christ. We need to be aware that we are not alone in our suffering, but that our brothers and sisters “throughout the world are going through the same kind of sufferings” (5:9).

We are called to pray for and encourage one another in the midst of our suffering, which enables us to minister with empathy and understanding (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). We have a great responsibility to pray for and minister to the persecuted church, and our own painful trial should remind us of our solidarity with and responsibility to the Body of Christ, here at IBC and throughout the world (Cairns, 25ff).

My heroes are those God has placed in my life and ministry and who continue to inspire me by their example of faithfulness amidst great obstacles, suffering and loss. We have the biblical heroes of the faith, a great “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), our contemporary heroes, and also examples throughout the history of the church.

Not long after the martyrdom of Simon Peter himself, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (d. 98/117) "was arrested and convicted of the 'crime' of believing in Christ. Chained to ten cruel guards, whom he described as 'ten wild leopards,' he made the tedious journey to Rome. His death march became a triumphal procession. He wrote beautiful letters of encouragement and hope to the Churches, the condemned comforting the free! And when at last he was flung to the lions in the arena at Rome, he cried with a loud voice, 'The wild beasts are the road to God!'" (Atkinson, 50).

And because our painful trial is beneficial to others, it is also beneficial...

To Christ

Christ longs for our fellowship with him, and works faithfully through our suffering to draw us closer to his love.

Our sufferings are also a continuation of the witness of his sufferings for us. Peter says we are to rejoice that we may participate in the sufferings of Christ" (13), which is what Paul seems to refer to as his sufferings as a "filling up in his flesh" what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24). Christ continues to suffer for the world, and draws others to his cross by the witness of our faithful and willing suffering. We suffer with Christ and for him in our painful trial. Our painful trial is an opportunity to honor Christ by our reflecting his love and our desire to honor him in the way we even rejoice in our suffering.

How far Simon Peter himself advanced in understanding and accepting the way of the cross and his painful trial! As one reports:

"The story is told of St Peter that when he died a martyr's death at Rome, he made no outcry because of his cruel fate, but only asked that he be crucified head-downwards. He was glad to die for his Savior, but too humble to die in the same position on the cross. He thought it no strange thing to suffer for Christ, but rejoiced to be counted worthy to suffer for His name!" (Atkinson, 51).

And thus the painful trial is also...

Endurable

Peter tells us how the painful trial is endurable because of our eternal perspective as the children of God. It's endurable because we are...

Looking to the end

We can rejoice and praise God amidst our painful trial because we are living in the last days, waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus, the consummation of the Kingdom and the fulfillment of our hope for glory. Peter says it's time for judgment to begin (17), and it's already begun for us, as I noted earlier. We have been saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, yet we are judged and

will be judged by the fruit of the Spirit, including godly character and good works (Matthew 7:15-23; 25:31-46).

Although we are saved by grace alone, we realize that though free God's grace is not cheap. It cost God his Son, Christ his suffering and death, and costs us our death to self. As God's being saved people we are also under his judgment to examine the quality of our faith. James makes it very clear that true saving faith cannot be separated or even exist apart from deeds (James 2:14-26).

The painful trial and the experience of suffering for the name of Christ is a time of testing the mettle and quality of our faith. As one has remarked, when the church suffers there is a refining process that separates true believers from those who are Christians in name only and whose faith is superficial if not entirely false. Suffering drops a plumb line into the midst of the confessing church to measure true from false believers (Jobes, 293). This is why the church has been most powerful and fruitful during times of persecution and why the church is thriving and growing inexorably today in places of persecution.

Jesus said that entrance into the Kingdom was through the narrow gate and entered only by a relative few (Matthew 7:13), and that only those who stand firm to the end will be saved (Mark 13:13). Quoting from Proverbs 11:31 in verse 18, Peter notes the complete hopelessness of the ungodly sinner, who spurns the grace of Christ, which is own only hope.

We don't stand up in our strength during our painful trial but rather we stand firm in the grace of God, proving ourselves to be God's redeemed children (Romans 5:2). Those who are standing faithful for Christ under severe persecution, in lands where it is illegal to be a Christian, have little reason to doubt the legitimacy and verity of their salvation and security in Christ. Their faith is being refined by fire and thus proving itself to be more valuable than gold (1:7).

In our text, painful trial is literally in the Greek "fiery trial" ("purosei," from "puroo," to burn, and "pur," fire. See Robertson, 126). Other scriptures, in addition to Peter, use the image of fire refining God's people and the quality of faith (e.g., Jeremiah 9:7; Malachi 3:3; Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 48:10; Daniel 11:35; Revelation 3:18). Here in our text the image is "plainly based on the Old Testament metaphor of the refining of metals," and "applied here to the sufferings which God sends to true believers" as an essential aspect of the Christian's participation in the sufferings of Christ (Lang, 951).

The trials and the evil day of suffering are endurable because we realize God is preparing us for eternal glory as he refines us and proves the mettle of our faith. When we go through the painful trial and fire of testing, we endure by looking to the end and by...

Trusting in the Creator

These words about the way we face the painful trial are difficult if not impossible for the unbelieving world to comprehend. It seems as though God

directs these experiences of testing our way. This “bold emphasis on the sovereignty and initiative of God, even in the suffering of his own people” is as one has written, “the most striking feature” of our text (Michaels, 274). We know God didn’t cause suffering; sin did. And we all have our part in the perpetuation of suffering in the world today. But in this fallen world, to get our sinful condition into Christ-shape, God permits suffering, and even prescribes it as part of our present cure, with everlasting results.

None less than the great Reformed theologian John Calvin said that in our text Peter “reminds us that we suffer nothing except by the permission of God, which greatly tends to comfort us” (313). It is comforting to know that anything, including our fiery, painful trials, cannot come to us apart from God’s loving permission.

Knowing the loving heavenly Father is caring for us and working all things together for our eternal good and his glory (Romans 8:28f), we can do as Peter says in the closing words of our text, “commit (ourselves) to our faithful Creator and continue to do good” (19).

Peter is calling for us to “entrust” (NRSV) ourselves to our Creator, and he uses a banking term, the word used when one’s wealth and lifetime of investments are entrusted to the hands and safekeeping of a banker (Wiersbe, 120).

We can and must entrust our lives and eternal destiny to the One who created us and who gave his Son to die for us. We must trust he knows exactly what he’s doing in, through and with us. He’s at work in our lives to prepare us for glory and will gladly reward us according to our steadfastness and faithfulness through our painful trial (Matthew 5:12).

We make a safe investment when we entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator; and what a return we get on our investment! Paul says that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Conclusion:

We don’t merely stand firm during our painful trial, but are called to “continue to do good” (19). We are called to be steadfast in our living godly lives and in our serving Christ and his Body on earth thorough loving service, as we noted last week (4:7-11).

Our text is a word of encouragement to those whose faith is under the judgment of a fiery trial, but also is a call to repentance to those who have spurned the only hope we can have of passing the judgment of God (18). I pray that today all of us will seek refuge in Christ and be prepared to face his final judgment.

Those of us who know Christ and follow him as Lord need to face the reality and even the inevitability of our own painful, fiery trial, but we need not do so with a spirit of dread or defeat. In fact, our Lord told us,

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

We face our trials as more than conquerors through Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37), who gives us grace and resurrection power to live faithfully and to benefit from our painful trials. We live in the reality of the risen and present Christ, who has gained the victory for us and calls us to live in the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:10).

I think it would be important for us to spend some time in prayer for the persecuted church and also for our brothers and sisters here today who are experiencing a painful trial and perhaps even are going through their “evil day.” Let’s pray that we all stand firm in Christ and that our painful trials will result in glory and praise to God, spreading his glory to those around us who will see “Christ in us, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think Peter urged the church to not let suffering/painful trials take them by surprise?
2. Is it more likely that we in the West (Europe and North America) are more likely to be surprised by our suffering for Christ? Why or why not?
3. In your observation and experience, do you think suffering for our faith in Christ is becoming more widespread in our culture and likely to face us more frequently and painfully?
4. According to our text, what is to be our attitude toward suffering, and how can we benefit from it?
5. In what way(s) is our witness for Christ affected by our suffering?
6. What is the process of judgment “with the family of God,” which Peter is referring to, and how might this include our experience of our “painful,” literally “fiery” trial of suffering? How can our fiery trial help prepare us for our final judgment?
7. What is our responsibility to our fellow believers who are suffering for their stand for Christ?

Sources cited in this manuscript:

Lowell M Atkinson, *Best Sermons*, 1951-52 Edition

Donald W Burdick, *The NIV Study Bible, New International Version*, General Editor, Kenneth Barker

Cairns, *The End of Suffering: Finding Purpose in Pain*

John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Volume 12, *Hebrews and I and II Peter*, Translated by W B Johnston

Karen H Jobes, *1 Peter: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*

Friedrich Lang, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume VI, Editors, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Translated by Geoffrey W Bromiley

J Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 49: *1 Peter*

Douglas J Moo, *NLT Study Bible, New Living Translation*, Second Edition, notes on 1 Peter

AT Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Volume VI: The General Epistles and the Revelation of John

Warren W Wiersbe, *Be Hopeful: 1 Peter*

All Rights Reserved.