

## **“When Christians Suffer”**

1 Peter 4:12-14

July can be the hottest time of the year, and no July on record was as hot as the one that the city of Rome experienced in 64 AD. It was hot not because of the weather, but because of a fire that broke out and raged for nine straight days. On the night of July 19, a fire started among the shops lining the Circus Maximus, Rome’s massive chariot stadium. In a city of two million people, there was nothing unusual about such a fire—smaller fires burned around Rome on a regular basis, particularly in the slums that covered much of the city. Knowing this full well, Nero was miles away in the coastal resort of Antium. Yet this was no ordinary fire. The flames raged for more than a week before coming under control; then the fire reignited and burned for another three days. When the smoke cleared, 10 of Rome’s 14 districts were in ruin. Two thirds of Rome had been destroyed. Hundreds died.

Many people suspected Nero himself of having set the blaze. There was no end to his ambition. One of his grand plans was to tear down a third of Rome so that he could build an elaborate series of palaces that would become known as ‘Neropolis.’ The Roman senate, however, objected to Nero’s plans. Exactly what happened next has remained enshrouded in mystery for nearly 2,000 years.

History has blamed Nero for the disaster, implying that he started the fire so that he could bypass the senate and rebuild Rome to his liking. Much of what is known about the great fire of Rome comes from the historian Tacitus, who claimed that Nero watched Rome burn while merrily playing his lyre. Soldiers prevented citizens from fighting the fire with threats of torture, Tacitus wrote. Who started the fire? All the evidence pointed to Nero, who sought a scape goat on whom he could pin the blame.

Nero blamed the fire on an obscure new religious sect called the Christians, whom he mercilessly went after with a vengeance. During gladiator contests, he would have Christians sown into the skins of wild animals and feed them to lions. He often lit his garden parties with the burning bodies of Christian human torches.

And so Peter says, “Don’t be surprised at the fiery trial...”

The last section of Peter’s letter to persecuted Christians reveals his pastoral heart. When I read the encouraging words that Peter writes, my mind goes back to what Jesus told Peter to do in John 21. “Peter, do you love Me? Feed My lambs.” That’s exactly what he is doing here as he seeks to encourage the Lord’s troubled little lambs and bring comfort to their hearts in the midst of their suffering.

The word ‘suffer’ or ‘suffering’ is used 17 times throughout 1 Peter. ‘Grace’ is mentioned some 10 times. ‘Glory’ is referred to around 12 times. The idea is that suffering is a very real part of life in this broken world, but God has sufficient grace for every trial we face, and it all for the sake of His glory.

Within these verses, we are once more reminded that suffering is part of the overall plan that God has for our lives. Remember what Peter has already said back up in 2:21 —“For to this you have been called.”

And yet it is through suffering and adversity that the Lord God proves His faithfulness in our lives.

Peter wants believers to know that Jesus Christ is the hope we have whenever we suffer. He alone is our strength and foundation. We endure suffering not by

what we feel, but through what we know. Peter mentions three things that are important for us to know whenever we suffer through the ‘fiery trials’ of adversity.

### **1. Trials should never SURPRISE us (4:12)**

*“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.”*

Trials are a common part of life in a fallen world. Keep in mind what Peter has already written in previous chapters.

It is important to point out the reason for these believers’ suffering. It was their unapologetic faith in the Lord Jesus. Sometimes, we suffer:

- as the consequence of our own poor choices
- at the hands of others
- from the common hurts of life

The ‘fiery trial’ that Peter is referring to here is one that has been brought on because of obedience to the gospel. Their faith in Jesus Christ made these believers the target of persecution.

This was to be expected in their lives. Jesus had said:

**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 they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”**

Look at what Peter has to say about suffering trials.

Don't assume the worst in the trial

Notice that he begins verse 12 with an expression of his deep love and concern —‘Beloved.’ They were weary and worn out from the pressures they were under. 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*

His use of this word is prophetic when you remember the history of the first wave of imperial persecution that would be unleashed within a few years of Peter’s writing. (Nero)

Even though they were in the midst of a fiery trial, they were not to assume the worst. Peter reminds them of who they are—‘Beloved.’ They were loved by God. He’s not downplaying their pain, nor is he being patronizing. He’s being a pastor. He is carefully and tenderly lifting their gaze upward to a God who is in perfect control.

Life’s pressures often tempt us to believe the opposite. When we hurt, we feel like God is a million miles away. As those who are faithfully serving God, we don’t expect adversity from His hand. Yet when it’s adversity that we receive, we’re often left scratching our heads and wondering why.

We need the same reminder that Peter gives the believers.

Listen to what he says—‘Beloved.’ You are loved by God. And the fact that you are suffering for His sake is a token evidence of His love.

**Hebrews 12:6-10—“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons...he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”**

God allows trials in our lives, not so much because of what we might or might not have done, but because of what we might or might not know. They become His primary classroom, necessary for our instruction. He never wastes a trial, but has a purpose behind each one. We don't learn the steadfast love and faithfulness of God by simply reading about it; we learn through experiencing it.

Don't be surprised by the trial

*“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.”*

In other words, don't let the trial catch you off guard. Don't live in a such a way where you think that you are beyond the reach of suffering. Peter says, “Don't be surprised, and don't think it strange.”

Some people are under the impression that God's blessing automatically means a life that is free from suffering. ‘God wants me to be rich. God wants me to be healthy. To be a Christian means that I'm ten feet tall and bulletproof.’ And yet the Bible says that none of us are immune to suffering. We should be surprised when we don't suffer.

There is not a single one of us who is fireproof. The opposite is true. To be a Christian involves suffering. It is the path we travel as we are on our way to future glory.

Don't miss the point of the trial

*“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.”*

We should not assume the worst and be surprised by trials that result in suffering because this is the way that our faith is tested and made strong. In order for muscles to be strengthened, they have to be exercised. It hurts! But without the pain of the gym, there is no gain in the body.

The same thing is true in the spiritual sense. It is only as we hurt that we learn to walk with God. We come to know God in an intimate and experiential way only through the classroom of adversity. Think of it:

- If Jesus is the Light of the world, the only way we learn this truth is when we’re surrounded by darkness.
- If Jesus is the Bread of life, the only way we learn this truth is when we experience hunger pains.
- If Jesus is Faithful and True, the only way we learn this truth is when the bottom falls out of life and we have no one else to run to.

**Tim Keller** — *“Think of four things that we want. Do you want to know who you are, your strengths and weaknesses? Do you want to be a compassionate person who skillfully helps people who are hurting? Do you want to have such a profound trust in God that you are fortified against the disappointments of life? Do you want simply to be wise about how life goes? Those are four crucial things to have—but none of them are readily achievable without suffering. **There is no way for you to know who you really are until you are tested.**”*

So don’t be surprised when trials result in suffering.

## **2. Trials must never DEPRESS us (4:13)**

*“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”*

We must be careful that we not abandon all hope when we go through fiery trials. It is very easy for us to do so.

I read a quote by Charles Spurgeon this week that the Lord really used to encourage me. By his own admission, God used difficulty in his life to prepare him for greater blessing:

*“Before any great achievement, some measure of the same depression is very usual...Such was my experience when I first became pastor in London. My success appalled me; and the thought of the career which it seemed to open up, so far from elating me, cast me into the lowest depth, out of which I uttered my misery and found no room for glory. Who was I that I should continue to lead so great a multitude? I would betake me to my village obscurity, or immigrate to America, and find a solitary nest in the backwoods, where I might be sufficient for the things that would be demanded of me. It was just then that the curtain was rising on my lifework...This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry.”*

In other words, the valley of suffering leads to personal blessing. None of us want to walk through it, however. Adversity has a way of triggering depression. The pain of trials and suffering can send us in a tailspin. But Peter presents us with an alternative.

The instruction Peter gives

He calls on believers to ‘rejoice’ two times here in verse 13. They were to rejoice insofar as they shared in Christ’s sufferings. To share in His suffering now means that we will one day share in His glory.

Peter is not calling on Christians to do something that he himself had not done. He had lived this firsthand. Peter had failed to suffer for Christ’s sake before the cross. Yet after he met the risen Jesus, and after He was filled with the Holy Spirit, everything changed.

**Acts 5:40-41 — “And when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”**

Peter knew from personal experience what it means to rejoice in spite of suffering.

**Habakkuk 3:17-18 — “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”**

The incentive believers have

We rejoice when we share in Christ’s sufferings because the time is coming when we will rejoice when His glory is revealed. We endure suffering when our gaze remains fixed on the glory of God.

### **3. Trials will never CONSUME us (4:14)**

*“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”*

Trials should not surprise us, and trials must not depress us, because ultimately, trials will never consume us. These believers were being persecuted for Christ's sake, and were suffering as a result of their faith. But no matter how severe their trials, Peter says that they were blessed.

Though their faith was being tried through suffering, it would not be destroyed through suffering.

**“Insulted”** — *word means to be defamed or reviled*

It is the same word that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes:

**Matthew 5:10-12—“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

Those who are insulted for Christ's sake are blessed and have reason to rejoice because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon their life. Suffering gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to have a unique ministry in our lives.

Where do you flee for refuge in times of testing, in seasons of suffering? We find strength and power in the presence of God. Jesus is our firm foundation in the furnace!

**Isaiah 43:1-2—“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”**

John Rippon was a Baptist preacher who lived in England during the days of the American Revolution. In 1773, he followed John Gill as the pastor of the New Park Street Chapel in London after Gill had served the church for 51 years. John Rippon would serve that same church for 63 years until his death in 1836. (It wouldn't be long after his death that a young man by the name of Charles Haddon Spurgeon would become pastor of the church, and its name would be changed to the Metropolitan Tabernacle.)

Rippon may not have been the preacher that Gill or Spurgeon was, but he was a prolific hymn writer. He published a hymnal in 1787 that contained one of his most famous hymns, "How Firm a Foundation."

*1 How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!*

*What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?*

*2 "In every condition, in sickness, in health,  
in poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth,  
at home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,  
as days may demand, shall thy strength ever be."*

*3 "Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,  
for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand."*

*4 "When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,*

*and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."*

*5 "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."*

*6 "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"*

Rippon's words echo the truth that Peter writes about here in this fourth chapter. Whenever Christians suffer, whenever the pathway of life takes us through the fiery trial, we always have a firm foundation upon which we rest, and no amount of suffering or difficulty will ever change that. It's this very thought that keeps us persevering through the trials of life as we are on our way to future glory.

*"Father, thank You for Your Word. The gospel must never be sugarcoated. There was a cross for Jesus, and there is a cross for those who bear His name. Yet the cross is the way to the crown! We praise You for the gift of Jesus who suffered and died to save us from our sins. May those who are lost repent and call upon His name even now, Lord. May Your church joyfully embrace suffering in order to take the gospel to those who have yet to be saved. And may those who are in the furnace sense Your presence in a personal, powerful way. In Jesus' name, Amen."*