

May 29, 2016

Sojourners *Walking through Fire with Joy*

1 Peter 4:12 – 19

In 1885, three Christian boys were burned alive for the sake of Christ in Uganda. The king had ordered the death of these boys in an effort to stamp out Christianity. The eldest was fifteen and the youngest was eleven-year-old Yusufu. They held fast their faith and staked their lives on it, though people were weeping and their parents were pleading with them. At the place of execution they sent a message to the king: ***'Tell his majesty that he has put our bodies in the fire, but we won't be long in the fire. Soon we shall be with Jesus, which is much better. But ask him to repent and change his mind, or he will land in a place of eternal fire and desolation.'*** They sang a song which is now well loved in Uganda as the 'Martyr's Song.' One verse says, *'O that I had wings like the angels. I would fly away and be with Jesus!'*

Forty adults came to Jesus the day the boys died. This was a new kind of life, which fire and torture could not control. By 1887, the end of the first decade of the church, hundreds had died. There were martyrs out of every village that had believers. They were only beginners, they knew little theology, and some could barely read, but they had fallen in love with Jesus Christ. Life had taken on a completely new meaning. The value of living eternally had been discovered. They were not holding on to their lives, but ready to give them for Jesus. During these dangerous days, there was an immediate and steady increase in the number of those embracing Christ.

When all the pages of the book of time are opened for all the saints to read in eternity, one fact will stand out above all others: **the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ was well-watered by the blood of those willing to pay the price of suffering.** From the death of Stephen in Jerusalem, and Peter and Paul in Rome, to John Hus in Bohemia, and James Harris in Erromanga, to Jim Elliot and his four companions in the jungles of Ecuador and Chet Bitterman in Bogota, Columbia, the countless numbers of Christians today in Syria and other parts of the middle East who are losing their heads for the sake of the gospel, and on and on. The success of the gospel seems to be directly related to the degree of suffering those who proclaim the gospel are willing to endure.

There would not be the church in China today had it not been for those believers who were willing to pay the price. They are the uncounted thousands of thousands, men and women of every age, who 'counted it all joy' to suffer and die for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though they were locked away in prison, their families were ripped apart, their Bibles and homes burned, their churches closed, those who survived continued to preach. Many still carry the physical scars of their suffering which they call their 'birthmarks into the Kingdom.' The testimonies of those who came to Christ during those years reveal that they considered suffering as just part of being a Christian.

The warning to others who would join them was: ***'Don't come into this meeting [of a house church] to talk about or do anything that you are not willing to die for.'*** Most pastors in the house churches there have served time in prison for their faith – in fact in one area the testimony is that the pastors in the house churches there have served an average of 17 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement. However, incredibly where once there were approximately only 2 million Christians in China when Mao came to power in 1949, today there are upwards of 100 million. ***'We not only survived,'*** wrote one Chinese Christian, ***'but look at us – we grew!'***

Peter is writing to do two things. He's writing first of all to inoculate the believers against the possibility of falling away from the faith under the reign of terror and persecution about to be unleashed in the Roman Empire. In fact some historians believe that it was already beginning at this point, and those who came to Christ could expect to be torn apart by the lions and wild beasts and depraved men in the Coliseum, or light a garden party as human torches in Nero's palace. And Peter says, ***'do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you...'*** In other words, we should expect fiery trials – not be intimidated or depressed by them, or let them make us fearful and cowering. **Because these fiery trials are purposeful, not random or mindless, or strange.** Peter says 'Don't think it a strange or unusual thing that you are undergoing severe testing because this is all in God's plan.'

Secondly, he is writing to encourage the believers not to lose heart in the suffering, but rather to walk through the fire with joy. In the middle of the thing, he says 'Don't lose your joy, but keep on rejoicing because one day the Lord is returning in glory, and then you really will rejoice. This fire is for your good and His glory. It is for your good because He is using this to refine and purify you'. The phrase, **fiery trial**, is one word in Greek, **purosisis**. And it literally means '**a burning**' and was used to describe what happens in the purifying process of metals. We get our word purify from this expression. In the letter to the lukewarm church in Laodicea, the Lord admonishes them to '**get gold refined by fire that you may become rich**'. These believers were described as seeing themselves as wealthy and in need of nothing, but the Lord says, '**You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. You've avoided the fiery trials that would have melted the dross in you and brought forth gold. You've run after making your lives comfortable and safe and risk free, and instead of being something beautiful, you're wretched and broke and miserable to boot**'.

Samuel Rutherford once wrote a letter to Lady Kenmure who was inconsolable at the death of her husband: "*This [world] is not a field where your happiness grows; it is up above, where there are a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. What you could never get here you shall find there. Consider how in all these trials (and truly they have been many) your Lord has been loosening you at the root from perishing things, and hunting after you to grip your soul. Madam, for the Son of God's sake, do not weaken His grip on you, but stay and abide in the love of God...*" When the emperor Valens threatened the early church leader, Eusebius, with confiscation of all his goods, torture, banishment, and even death, he replied, "*He needs not fear confiscation, who has nothing to lose; nor banishment, to whom heaven is his country; nor torments, when his body can be destroyed at one blow; nor death, which is the only way to set him at liberty from sin and sorrow.*"

These fiery ordeals come from the loving hand of a wise and generous Father who knows that we need to loosen our grip on the things of this earth and strengthen our grip on Him. He knows that fiery trials in our lives work to find us out. They expose what we hold most dear to us and show us what matters most to us. They rearrange our priorities and clear our vision for what is most important. '*Before I was afflicted*' the psalmist writes, '*I went astray. But now I keep Your word.*'¹ In Deuteronomy, on the verge of going into the promised land, Moses tells the people that testing is still the order of the day: '*For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*'² After all the wars and trouble the people had in the book of Joshua, the book of Judges records that not all their enemies were subdued but God left some of them there, and, '*They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*'³ And James tells us that the testing of our faith is **necessary** and productive.⁴

Here Peter makes the point that fiery trials are being experienced by believers and unbelievers alike, but there are two very different outcomes. **17 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?** Peter calls the fiery trials, the judgment of God. And we must understand this as God's judgment that comes on believers to purify them and comes on unbelievers to consume them. This is not a judgment for believers unto condemnation – '*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...*' But for those who do not believe – the same fiery trials that purify believers will instead consume them. For God's people it is His purifying fire; for those who reject Him it is His punishing wrath. And Peter says here that this judgment begins with God's household and ends with those who do not obey the gospel. On the one hand, "*The Lord disciplines him whom He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives*"⁵, and on the other hand, He will be *inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*⁶

1 Psalm 119:67 ESV

2 Deuteronomy 13:3 ESV

3 Judges 3:4 ESV

4 James 1:3 ESV

5 Hebrews 12:6

6 2 Thessalonians 1:8 ESV

In verse 13 here, the fiery ordeal is called 'sharing Christ's sufferings.' In verse 14 it is called being 'insulted for the name of Christ.' And in verse 16 it is called 'suffering as a Christian.' And in verse 19 it is called suffering 'according to God's will.' So the suffering that is coming is due to the fact that the believers are following Christ in His suffering, identifying with Him openly, living distinct lives from the world, and being labeled "Christian." In fact the testimony from believers throughout history in most of the world is that to accept baptism as a Christian is to say publicly that you are ready to die for the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul Rader, one of the most powerful evangelists of the 20th century, once visited the Colosseum in Rome where thousands of Christians were martyred for the cause of Christ and he later wrote: ***"I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked myself, 'Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?'"***

Those early Christians, and all those who through the centuries who lived on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no attachments to hold them back, with nothing to lose and only heaven to gain, willing to die so that others might live, suffering insult, indignity, and death with joy, must have asked and answered a similar question. And I think that we must ask ourselves that question. You see, if our allegiance to Jesus is only as deep as the comforts we enjoy, or the blessings we receive, when those things are not there anymore, we are prone to stumble, we are apt to falter, and we may find ourselves embracing compromise instead of living out our conviction. In fact, the way you answer that question will have a profound effect on how you live your life. Living with the possibility that one day you will answer for your faith with your life has a way of putting all the stuff of this life in perspective.

So how do we live like that? First of all **we need to know what God is like.** *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.* We need to have a deep and true theology – an accurate knowledge of God. Good theology has only one real purpose – to build a great faith in a great God. We need to know how God works and how God speaks and how God moves in the hearts of men so that we will not be surprised when fiery ordeals come upon us. If you know that sometimes God wills for His people to suffer; if you understand that He disciplines all those He loves; if you are aware that to follow in His steps will necessarily mean suffering; if you understand that the same act of judgment can be purifying love for believers and punishing wrath for unbelievers – then you will not question God and raise your fist to heaven when three young boys in the plan of God are burned to death that the gospel might run and prosper in Uganda.

Some time ago, I read a book, called *Night* by a man who lost his faith and his God in the hell of a Nazi concentration camp. The man's name is Elie Wiesel, a Jew, and he suffered unimaginable horrors as a teenager in Buna, and Buchenwald and Auschwitz. And that suffering led him to conclude that if there was a God, He was no longer relevant to him. As a young boy before the camps he was a lover of God and a diligent student of the Bible – he even had ambitions to be a rabbi. But there in the camps, witness to the cruel inhumanity of man to man and apparent pointless suffering of thousands, his faith crumbled. While others around endured those same things, and yet worshipped God, his faith was shipwrecked. He writes, *'I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now...'* The Bible tells us that Israel only knew God through His acts or works – but Moses knew God's ways. And if you only know God through His acts – you might conclude that God is cruel and capricious and unloving, like Elie Wiesel. But if you know God's ways you will know just the opposite because you see the awesome scope of His mercy and love and grace to a fallen human race; and you know with certainty that God is for you and not against you and that all God's ways are directed toward your good and His glory.

Secondly, **we need to live with eternity in view.** *13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* How do you rejoice when your loved ones or friends are put to death? How do you rejoice when good men and women are sent off to prison leaving their families to fend for themselves and suffer with them? How do you rejoice when the fiery ordeals threaten to consume you? You do it the same way our Lord Jesus endured the fiery ordeal of the cross – *'Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame...'* Jesus said: *'Blessed are you when men 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.'* Matthew 5:11

It is joy in the anticipation of the joys of heaven that help our hearts not to faint when things go south. It is joy in the knowledge of a faithful and merciful Savior who called us to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus. It is joy in knowing that our lives on earth are but a vapor that vanishes quickly – but our life in glory is forever and ever in an unimaginable place of beauty and fullness. It is joy in knowing that momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory. It is joy in knowing that our suffering for the sake of Christ only serves to highlight God's power and ability. There is a hill in Nagasaki, Japan, where, in 1597, 26 people were crucified by the order of the Emperor for being Christians. Among them was Thomas Kosaki, a 12 year old boy who was crucified along with his father. The night before he wrote a short letter to his mother and said: "Mother we are supposed to be crucified tomorrow in Nagasaki. Please do not worry about anything because we will be waiting for you to come to heaven. Everything in the world vanishes like a dream. Be sure that you never lose the happiness of heaven." Live with eternity in view.

Thirdly, **let your suffering be for doing what is right, not what is wrong.** *15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.* In other words, live in such a way that the suffering you endure is not for punishment of bad behavior. Back in chapter two, and in verse 19 of this chapter, Peter makes it clear that the suffering we endure as believers is suffering that comes as a result of doing what is right, not what is wrong. *For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.* 1 Peter 2:19-20. In other words, you don't get credit for suffering a just punishment. You only get credit when the suffering comes unjustly on the account of Christ. You see, God gets the glory and you are blessed only when your suffering comes from your identification with Jesus.

Here Peter combines some descriptions that might seem odd at first. He talks about murder and theft and general evil behavior, and then he adds '**meddler**' to that list. 'Don't suffer as a meddler'. The NASB translates this word as '**troublesome meddler**', which is probably a more clarifying description. This is someone who involves himself in the affairs of others without invitation and with the intent to stir up trouble. And I can just see Peter's readers nodding gravely in agreement as they read '*let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer...*' And then sort of looking up in surprise as they get to 'meddler'. And it may be that Peter is pinpointing a problem among these believers since this is a curious way to end the list if there was no specific relevance to his readers. In other words Peter is saying, 'Some of you are suffering because you're sticking your nose where it doesn't belong'. And that suffering is for punishment. You won't be blessed for that.'

Fourthly, **live and die in such a way that God gets the glory.** *16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 17 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? 18 And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* God gets glory from us when the way we speak and live shows that He is glorious. If you trust Him you show that He is gloriously praiseworthy. If you rejoice in suffering for His sake you show that He is more valuable than the pleasures and approval of man. If you do good to your persecutors instead of retaliating, you show that He is gloriously sufficient to satisfy your longings. The one all-consuming desire of true Christians is that Christ be glorified in their bodies whether by life or by death. Max Lucado tells a story about a friend of his who had cancer. Some well intentioned Christians had told him 'If you have faith, then you will be healed'. But, no healing came, only a crisis in faith in that man's life. Max suggested another answer to him, "It's not about you", Max told him. **"Your hospital room is a showcase for your Maker. Your faith in the face in suffering cranks up the volume of God's song."**

Finally, **hand yourself over to God.** *19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.* Entrust your souls to Him. Place yourself in God's hands for safekeeping. The word is not the usual one for 'trusting God' but rather Peter uses a verb that means '**to give something to someone for safekeeping**'. In other words, hand yourself over to God. Understand that just because you are suffering, it does not mean things are out of control. Actually they are very much under control. They're under God's complete control. He is working everything in your life to bring you to glory with joy.

It is relatively easy to think about trusting yourself to God when everything is going well. It is an entirely different thing when you are suffering. We tend to think that God knows exactly what He's doing when the sun is shining on our lives; when things are good; there's money in the bank, the family is well, your job's going great and people are kind. But when things go south, we have a disturbing tendency to think that God has let things slip a bit. He's not on top of things, because if He were He'd know what's going bad down here and fix it. We begin to question His character and integrity and love for us. But Peter says, 'Don't do that. God is still on the throne, directing and affecting everything in your life for His glory and your good.'

Here Peter is pointing the believers straight back to chapter 2, and his description of the Son of God: *When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly.*⁷ In other words, in the middle of the worst set of circumstances for Jesus, He didn't wonder about His Father's integrity or intentions. He didn't begin to question His Father's actions or lack of action. He kept entrusting Himself to the One who had everything perfectly under control. In the same way, Peter tell us to hand ourselves over to a faithful Creator, just like Jesus handed himself over to the just and perfect Judge. He entrusted Himself to the just Judge who would ultimately vindicate Him, and in doing so He effected healing for our sin-sick souls from His wounds on the cross. He knew His suffering was unjust, but He also knew that His suffering would be our blessing. So just as Jesus entrusted Himself to the just Judge of all, entrust yourself to your faithful Creator, and keep on rejoicing.

Dori Hadad came from one of the oldest, wealthiest, and most respected families in Syria, but none of that was of any use in protecting her and her husband and children from the violence and bloodshed of the present conflict in Syria. Forced to flee her home in Damascus after her husband was arrested and probably killed, Dori and her two children made their way to a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan. There Dori and her daughter began having dreams of a man dressed in white who called Himself Jesus. It was there in that camp that Dori met a Christian woman called Samar and heard the gospel for the first time and put her trust in Jesus. And now Dori spends her days witnessing to Muslims in that camp. From a priveleged life of frequent trips to Europe, long weekends in the playgrounds of Dubai, wearing the latest fashions and eating at the best restaurants, to living and working and surviving in a refugee camp in a foreign country, Dori doesn't appear to have anything to be joyful about.

But these are her own words to us: 'Jesus and His early followers are also wonderful examples for us refugees. On the night He was betrayed, He said, 'Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. (John 16:22) His followers would soon be forced to leave Jerusalem, making them refugees. People now tell me that I have eyes filled with hope and joy. I no longer have to worry about anything in this life – nothing! Jesus is on the throne, and He watches over me. Whatever happens to me – even if it is persecution or death – must go through Jesus first...Regardless of how good or bad your situation, He is your provider and will give you what He knows is best for you. You see, when you are in Jesus, you can never be a refugee. You are not forgotten'.¹⁸

Our gracious and faithful Father,

Teach us to number our days and get a heart of wisdom. Don't let us play with the preciousness of life and the riches of heaven. Make us ready to die well by helping us live well by helping us trust You well. Don't let us be surprised by our suffering or waver at the betrayal of friends and the blast of unjustified hate. Help us to embrace our lot and count it all joy and to say with Paul, 'to live is Christ and to die is gain.' Take away our doubting – fix our minds and hearts firmly on Your word and make us lion-hearted in the cause of Christ and the proclamation of the gospel. Grant us a resilient, never-give-up perseverance in the face of seeming catastrophe, and let our lives shine for Your glory we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen.

7 1 Peter 2:23 ESV

8 Doyle, Tom, Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tenn. 2015), 73