

How To Respond To Suffering

1 Peter 4:12-19

Pastor John Miller

Follow with me in 1 Peter 4:12-19.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part, He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the Gospel of God? Now ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved...’—or a better translation would be, ‘If the righteous are saved through much adversity or difficulty or hardship’—‘...where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?’ Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.”

Someone once said that “God has only one Son without sin, but none without sorrow.” I love that quote. Jesus was a man acquainted with grief. He was a man of sorrows, and He identifies with our sorrow.

Peter is writing in this particular text to strengthen saints—and believe me, saints do suffer. They were facing what he calls in verse 12 a “fiery trial.” Now he doesn’t tell us what kind, but it’s obvious from the text that they were being persecuted, they were being opposed, they were being attacked by the unbelieving world. The non-Christians were attacking them for their faith in Jesus Christ. Always Christians have been opposed and persecuted by the unbelieving world. So they were facing a “fiery trial.” As a result, he instructed them on how to respond in the midst of their suffering.

In this text, we discover four inner attitudes to help us in times of sorrow and suffering. I want this to be real rubber-meets-the-road. I want you to see them in the text. We’ll see four things you need to do when you are suffering.

The first thing you need to do is expect suffering, verse 12. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial...”—or “test”—“...which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.”

What is the first and natural reaction we have to sorrow or suffering? There are two things that we do. Sometimes we say, “God must be mad at me right now,” or “God is angry with me” or “God doesn’t love me.” Then the second thing we say is, “Why me? This is really strange. I don’t think I deserve this.” So we usually do the “Why me? Why is this happening to me? He

doesn't love me."

Isn't it interesting, verse 12, that Peter opens with the word "beloved"? This is a reminder to these suffering saints that "God loves you."

This is bedrock; I want you to have this as a foundation for your life: no matter what happens to you in the way of sorrow and suffering, God never stops loving you. God's love is consistent. God's love can't be influenced; I can't make God love me more, and I can't do anything to make God love me less. God just loves me. Everyone is loved by God. You may not think so, because God allowed some horrible thing to happen to you. But it doesn't mean that you are not beloved by God.

The second thing we do is we think it's strange. "Why me?" "I go to church, I read my Bible, I pray. I'm a good person. Why should this happen to me?" So Peter says, in verse 12, "Do not think it strange."

The Greek word "strange" is where we actually get our word "foreigner" or "alien" from. So what Peter is saying to us is, "Don't think it's foreign" or "Don't think it's alien that you, as a Christian, would be sorrowing or suffering in this way. Don't be surprised that you're suffering."

Why do we suffer? Because we live in a fallen world. Many times people ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" First of all, we have to ask, "What's a 'bad thing' and who's a 'good person'?" Have you ever stopped to think about that? Life's great question is, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But no one stops to ask, "What's a 'bad thing' and who's a 'good person'?" So the real question is, "Who does God say is 'good' or 'bad'?" It's not a matter of 'good' things-'bad' things, or 'good' person-'bad' person; it's a matter that we live in a fallen world, and because of that, we're all going to suffer in this fallen world.

Notice Peter calls this a "fiery trial." In other words, it has a design, a purpose, an intention. God is in control. God allowed it. God designed it for our good and for His glory. That's pretty encompassing. Remember that whenever you suffer, it's for your good and for God's glory. God is using it for your good and for His glory. One of the chief ways that God brings us into the likeness of Christ is through suffering.

In verse 12, Peter uses the phrase, "as though some strange thing happened to you." This word "happened" literally means "to go together." It doesn't convey the idea of just happenstance or that this just happened. When things go wrong, some people say, "Oh, this is so bizarre. Why did this happen?" This word "happened" means that it was planned, it was designed, it was purposed by God. Don't think it foreign that you are in a "fiery trial" or that it just happened to you. It didn't just happen; it was purposed, designed and intended by a loving God, Who is doing it for your good and for His glory.

When Job was attacked by the devil, the devil was only able to do to Job what God had given him permission to do. Don't forget that. The same is true of you and me. God put a hedge around Job. It wasn't because Job was a super-saint. It was because that's what God does for

His people.

I believe with all my heart that everyone of us who is God's children have a hedge around us. And nothing—I repeat—nothing can penetrate that hedge but what God knows about, allows, purposes and designs. You say, “I wonder why He allowed it to penetrate my head. I'd like to talk to God.” I don't know. But I know we can trust Him. You know that Father knows best; right? He's in control.

So the first thing we need to realize is that we need to expect suffering. D. Edmond Hiebert said, “He who enlists under the banner of the crucified Christ need not be surprised if conflict, hardship and suffering follow.” Jesus said, “In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” By the way, I've never seen that verse in those little promise boxes. It's kind of a little Christian fortune-telling card. So we should expect suffering.

Let me give you the second point that we need to do when we suffer. Not only do you expect it, but rejoice in suffering, verses 13-14. “But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If...”—or “since”—“...you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed...”—or “happy”—“...are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part...”—that is, the unbelievers—“...He is blasphemed, but on your part, He is glorified.”

Now there is a sharp, intended contrast in verse 13. Instead of our sorrow and suffering causing bewilderment, it should prompt us to praise. Instead of panic, we should begin to praise the Lord—not praise God that things are going wrong, but praise God that He is using it for my good and for His glory under His care and control, and that He knows what He's doing.

In Acts 5:41, Peter was among the Apostles who were beaten and told they were no longer to preach in the name of Jesus. The text says that “They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”

Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, falsely accused and whipped. Their hands and feet were put into stocks. Then in this inner dungeon at midnight, they sang praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them. What a glorious thing that is.

Would you be praising God if you were falsely accused, thrown into prison and beaten and whipped? But they praised the Lord in the middle of the night. The Bible says that “God gives us songs in the night.”

Jesus said in Matthew 5:12 that when we are persecuted, we should “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

In James 1:2, he said, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”

You say, “Well, Pastor, this is not easy to do.” I know it's not easy to do. But that's what God

tells us to do in His Word, and whatever God tells us to do, God will enable us to do. I wrestle with the same attitude.

If you're having a hard time rejoicing in your trials, Peter gives us some reasons in the text why we should rejoice. This is not happiness, based on happenings; this is joy, which is the work of the Spirit. It's not based on my circumstances. It is an inner artesian well that gives me a joy and His peace, no matter what is going on around me.

There are four reasons for rejoicing in my suffering. Number one is that our suffering for Christ means a deeper fellowship with Christ, verse 13. It says, "To the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings...." You can rejoice, because you know that your suffering is going to bring you into a deeper experience of the love of God. The great allegory by John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, was written from Bedford Prison when he was incarcerated for preaching the Gospel. He made this statement: "In times of affliction, we most commonly meet with the sweetest experiences of the love of God." How true that is.

Now we are not atoning for our sins. Jesus died on the Cross and paid the penalty. That's complete and finished. But we are brought into fellowship with Him. Paul spoke about this in *Philippians 3:10*. He said, "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." Paul wanted to know "the fellowship of His sufferings," because it brought him into a fellowship with Christ.

Secondly, another reason to rejoice when we suffer is that our suffering now for Christ means glory when Christ comes again, verse 13. "When His glory is revealed...." I believe that is a reference to the Second Coming, when Christ comes in power and glory and majesty. "You may also be glad with exceeding joy."

It might be that you're going through a time of heaviness and sorrow right now. But I'm going to tell you that there is coming a day when you're going to be full of exuberant joy. That is when you come back with Jesus Christ in the Second Coming. All of your sorrows will be forgotten, all of your suffering and all of your pain. You will be coming back with Him in power and great glory. It will all be worth it.

Isn't life short? All the old people say, "Amen!" Where did it go? "I just graduated from high school last week!" It goes so fast. There's going to be a day when we wake up and we're going to see Jesus face to face. No more sorrow, no more suffering, no more pain. All the former things are going to pass away. Our joy will be complete. It will be amazing. So he actually tells us here that when Christ comes, we'll experience "exceeding joy."

Suffering now makes us long for glory. When a Christian suffers in this world now, it weans him from the world and makes him long for glory. The problem with Christians today is not that "they're so heavenly minded they're no earthly good." The problem is that we're so earthly minded that we're no heavenly good. We need to think more about heaven. We need to long more to go to heaven. We need to think more with an eternal perspective and what the future

holds for the Christian.

For the Christian, this world is the closest you'll ever get to hell. For the unbeliever, this is the closest you'll ever get to heaven. For the believer, we're looking forward to being with Christ and the glory that we're going to share. Peter holds that before them, in hopes that they would be encouraged.

Paul says in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." What an awesome hope that is!

The third reason we rejoice in our suffering is that suffering brings to us the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The first reason for rejoicing in suffering was that it brings me into a deeper fellowship with Christ—the fellowship of His suffering, being identified with Him. This third reason is very closely related, but it has more the idea of what the Spirit does in our hearts. Notice in verse 14: "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you..."—why?—"...for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Who is "the Spirit of glory and of God"? It's the Holy Spirit. These are two other titles for the Holy Spirit. This would literally be rendered, "Rest with refreshing power."

You want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in your life? There is no deeper or more powerful experience than when you go through times of suffering. Remember Jesus in His upper room discourse, John 13-17? He promised that He was going to leave but that He would give them "another comforter." The Greek word for "comforter" is "parakletos." That word is a reference to the Holy Spirit. He is the comforter or the parakletos. The word literally means "one who comes alongside" you to strengthen and comfort and to encourage. If you've ever gone through a hard time and felt all alone, then somebody comes up and puts their arm around you, they don't even say a word, but it's just their presence that encourages you.

I want you to know that as a Christian, you are never alone. The Holy Spirit is there with you. He is your comforter. It's not just that He says, "It's going to be all right"; He actually strengthens us. When somebody is going through a time of difficulty, you could take away the difficulty to help them, or you could undergird them to strengthen them to bear up under the difficulty. That's what the Holy Spirit does. He doesn't always take away your problems, but He comes to help us and pick us up and strengthen us to walk with God.

When Stephen was being stoned in Acts 7 and the rocks were hitting his body, they said that they looked at the face of Stephen. By the way, the name Stephen or Stefanos means "victor's crown." Diadem is a kingly crown; stefanos is a victor's crown. So his name means that he was the first to wear the martyr's crown. Stephen looked up into the heavens as the rocks were hitting his body and he said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" He addressed God directly and said, "'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." When they looked at his face—I call him Stephen with the "angel face"—it was shining and radiant like an angel's, because the Spirit of God and of glory was resting upon him. It's the work of the Holy Spirit.

You may be walking in a dark place, but God is never at a distance. You may be in the dark, but God is not far away. Psalm 23:4 says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”—in the Hebrew it’s the “valley of deepest darkness”—“...I will fear no evil...”—why? —“...for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” That’s the Holy Spirit. You’re never alone; He’s always there to help you. When you’re going through a time of sorrow and suffering, just breathe that prayer: “O, Holy Spirit, give me strength. O, Holy Spirit, give me comfort right now.” He will answer that prayer. He comes to you as the comforter to strengthen you and to help you through that time. No matter how deep and dark the valley that you are passing through, He is with you.

The fourth reason for rejoicing in our suffering is that suffering enables us to glorify God. Verse 14 says, “On their part...”—that is, “the unbelieving world” or “the persecutors”—“...He is blasphemed...”—or “evil spoken of”—“...but on your part...”—or “the Christians who were suffering”—“...He is glorified.”

When you pass through sorrow and suffering and are being persecuted or going through difficulty, God wants to be glorified in your situation. Not only for your good but for His glory.

In one of my favorite devotional books, written by J.R. Miller—no relation—he said, “A photographer carries his picture into a darkened room that he may bring out its features. The light of the sun would mar the impression on the sensitized plate. There are features of spiritual beauty which cannot be produced in the light and glare of human joy and prosperity. God brings out in many a soul its loveliest qualities when the curtain is drawn and the light of human joy is shut out.” It’s so true.

The greatest joys of life are the fruits of sorrow. We’re praying that everything goes smooth and that God takes away all our problems, but He allows them to draw us closer to Him—to keep us humble and wean us away from the world and make us long for heaven. They are for our good and for His glory, so rejoice in them.

Here is the third thing you need to do when you suffer: examine your life, verses 15-18. “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the Gospel of God? Now ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved...”—or “saved with great difficulty”—“...where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

Now there is a danger when we’re going through suffering that we not be too introspective. We can get all hung up on “God’s punishing me. He doesn’t love me. Why is God letting this happen to me?” But God actually allows the furnace to bring us more light by which we can see our lives in light of God’s holiness. So it does make sense that we ask, “God, what are You trying to teach me? How do You want me to grow? What are You doing in my life? Is there a sin that You want to cleanse out of my heart?” It’s God’s refining process to remove the dross,

so to speak, of sin and self from our hearts.

There are a few questions you ask yourself when you go through suffering. Number one, “Am I suffering because of my sin?” Verse 15. “Am I suffering because I’m a murderer or because I’m a thief or because I’m an evil person or because I’m a busybody?” Isn’t that amazing that He throws “busybody” in with “murderer”? “Busybody” is a person who doesn’t mind his own business. They put their nose in areas in which they don’t belong. If you get into things you shouldn’t get into and you’re persecuted for it, that’s not good. If you go to prison because you killed somebody, don’t say, “Praise the Lord! Suffering for righteousness sake.” No. You steal something and get arrested, don’t say, “Oh, it’s because I’m a Christian.” No. It’s because you’re a thief! Duh! There’s no commendation there; that’s not to be commended. If you’re suffering, you need to be sure that it’s not because of your own sin.

Secondly, ask yourself, “Am I ashamed of Christ when I suffer, or do I seek to glorify Christ?” Verse 16, “If anyone suffers as a Christian...” I’ve always loved this passage for the help it gives to suffering saints, but also because it mentions very clearly that Christians do suffer. We suffer as Christians. That’s contrary to a lot of people’s theology today. They think that because we’re King’s Kids nothing will ever go wrong and we should be living victoriously. Yes, we live victoriously, but that doesn’t mean problem free.

It says, “If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” In the Greek, “let him glorify God” is in the present tense—habitually, ongoing, continually. It’s called an imperative. That means it’s a command; it’s not an option. Whenever you’re suffering you’re commanded to seek to glorify and honor God. Don’t be ashamed. You’re not suffering for sin; you’re suffering for righteousness’s sake, and you should seek to glorify God.

The third question you should ask is, “Am I concerned for the lost when I suffer?” Verses 17-18 say, “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God.” He’s talking about God’s chastening of Christians; He’s not talking about final judgment for our sin. That’s taken care of; we’ve been justified and forgiven. We’re not going to stand before God for our sin, but right now, God allows chastisement, suffering and sorrow in the life of the believer. “Judgment... at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the Gospel of God?” He identifies them as “those who do not obey the Gospel of God.” So they hear the Gospel, they reject the Gospel and they are unbelievers.

Then He says, “Now ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved...’” That has troubled some people. What does that mean? He’s talking about Christians going to heaven through suffering, through hardships, through adversity, through difficulty. He’s not saying it’s hard for God to save us, or God just barely gets you saved. He’s actually saying that as a Christian, you go through trials and trouble and adversity. And if that’s the case, then the conclusion, with a rhetorical question at the end of verse 18, is “Where will the ungodly...”—those who have no fear of God, the unbelievers—“...and the sinner...”—those who disobey God’s commands and Word—“... appear?” The expected answer to this question is that they’re going to be judged,

they're going to hell, they're going to perish, they're going to perdition, they're going to be destroyed.

If God allows Christians to suffer and go through hardship and they go to heaven, what happens to those who reject the Gospel, those who are ungodly, those who are sinners, as described in this passage? Obviously, He is implying that they will be judged.

So when you suffer and go through hard times, use it as an opportunity to be a witness to unbelievers. If someone is persecuting you, or you're going through a trial and people are watching how you respond, you need to remember that God wants to use you to be a witness.

In Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were in prison and were singing at midnight, Luke includes in the story, "And the prisoners were listening to them." Why did he do that? Because when the earthquake came, the first thing that the Philippian jailer said was, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Why did he say that? Because Paul and Silas were singing in the night. If they were sulking and complaining and griping, do you think he would have run in and said to them, "I need what you have"? No. If you're suffering right now, work with unbelievers and you're complaining and griping and whining, you think that's going to win them to Christ?

Parents, your children are watching you. You take them to church and tell them about Jesus, you want them to be good Christians, then you be a good Christian. When you're going through suffering, rejoice, glorify God, be a good witness. Their eyes are on you. It doesn't do any good to take them to Sunday school and then whine and complain all week. "Why doesn't God let us make more money? Why did God let the car break down? Why did the refrigerator break? Why did the toilet back up and overflow? Why did the dog dig under the fence?"

I used to have a dog that would escape and break out of the house. It's funny that down at the end of the street was a church. He always went to the church. Where else would a pastor's dog go? Someone in the congregation would call and say, "Pastor Miller, your dog is at our church again this Sunday. Would you come and get it?"

"Sorry about that. Christian dog. He goes to church."

You need to be a witness when you're passing through the dark spots of life, because that's where the light shines.

Here is the fourth thing you need to do when you suffer. And this is my favorite, in verse 19. Don't miss it. Commit yourself to God when you suffer. I almost titled this Have Yourself Committed. Notice verse 19: "Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God..." Not only does he make it clear in this passage that Christians suffer but that you can suffer in "the will of God." What do you do? Here's the command: "Commit their souls..."—your whole personality, body, soul and spirit; your whole being—"...to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator."

This is the only place in the New Testament where God is called a "faithful Creator"; where

those two words are put together. Peter is writing to suffering Christians, and he's saying, "Trust your faithful Creator." How marvelous.

The fact that he opens verse 19 with a "therefore," coupled with a command or imperative, indicates that this is Peter's summary passage. What he began in verse 12, he now summarizes in verse 19. He says, "Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God, do this: commit the keeping of your souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator."

Let me break this down for you. Our suffering can be in harmony with God's loving purpose and will. Verse 19, "Let those who suffer according to the will of God..."

Over 45 years ago, when I started running into the health-and-wealth prosperity doctrines, God brought me to this passage. It was when I was being taught that if you're suffering, you're out of the will of God. I actually saw a preacher, when he was teaching a sermon, reach into his pocket, pull out his wallet and took out a \$100 bill. He said, "If you don't have \$100 in your wallet right now, you're out of the will of God."

I thought, "Oh my goodness, I've never been in God's will. My wallet's never seen \$100." That's insane!

I can't tell you the comfort this verse has brought me over the years. "Let those who suffer according to the will of God..." God has a purpose. God has a design. It's for your good and for His glory. Trust Him. In verse 14, he says, "If you are reproached for the name of Christ..." Verse 16 says, "If anyone suffers as a Christian..." Yes, you can suffer, so don't complain, don't whine, don't resist.

The second point I want to make is to commit yourself to God, which is in verse 19. That word "commit" is a banking or financial term. It means "to deposit for safekeeping." It's in the present tense and it's an imperative. It means "continually entrusting yourself to God's protective care." Look at 1 Peter 5:7. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

Do you know that God wants to take care of your cares? He wants to handle your problems and your worries. He cares about your cares. You can throw them on God. That word "casting" means "to throw once and for all." Leave it there.

Here's the third thing you need to do, verse 19. Keep doing what is right. Notice the phrase "in doing good." In other words, you commit yourself to God, and you keep on doing what is right. You don't resort to the flesh or do evil.

Then fourthly and lastly, verse 19, remember God is faithful, "as to a faithful Creator." I like the New Living Translation of verse 19: "If you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, trust your lives to God, Who created you, for He will never fail you." I love that.

I want all of you to know that God is faithful, and you'll never be disappointed. If you put your

trust in God, if you put your hope in God, if you put your confidence in God, you will not be disappointed. God will take care of you. So trust yourself to Him.

Someone said, "All that I've seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all that I've not seen." Faithful Creator.

2 Timothy 1:12 says, "For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day."

2 Thessalonians 3:3 says, "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one."

Jude 24 says, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy...."

So here are the four things we need to do when we suffer: Don't think it's strange—expect it; rejoice or exalt in it; evaluate your life—"Why am I suffering?"; and entrust yourself to a faithful God. He is your Creator, He is your Redeemer and He is your Father in heaven. The God who created you is the God who redeemed you, and He is your Father Who you can trust.