

A Right Perspective on Suffering in the Christian Life
Our Identity in Christ
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Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter 4. 1 Peter chapter 4. We move to a new section this morning of this fourth chapter, verses 12 to 19 and what we see as we come to the end of kind of a parenthesis, the last section we spent a number of weeks on was actually kind of a parenthesis in the larger argument of Peter in this section that we've been looking at. Peter writes his letter in the first century, 63 AD, to believers in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, at least 10 churches spread out across that area that were in view from what we can tell that would have been strong by that time that Peter wrote, and he writes to encourage them in times of great difficulty and affliction. He writes to encourage them to bear up in suffering and we've seen that's a major theme in the book, the idea of suffering and the idea of persecution. It's not just suffering in general, but particularly the suffering that comes from persecution. In fact, before we read the passage, I want to just point this out so we see it. This is a key burden on the apostle's heart is to prepare Christians to stand firm and faithful in the midst of opposition and he turns to this particular issue in the section that we're talking about now, chapter 2 verse 12, which runs all the way through chapter 4 verse 19, and this is focused on faithfulness in suffering, particularly faithfulness in the suffering of persecution and you see this idea of persecution and suffering are throughout this letter. In chapter 2 verse 12, he says, "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds glorify God." He's saying that he understands you're being slandered as Christians. He's writing to those Christians that you're being slandered because of your faith. Gentiles, unbelievers are looking at you and they're slandering you. They're saying that you're evildoers. They misunderstand your love for God, your love for Christ, your holy life. Verse 15 of chapter 2, he says, "For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men." That is, these foolish men are slandering you, and by living a godly life you silence their ignorance. Suffering is a key word in this letter. Verse 19 of chapter 2, "For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God, a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God." Suffering and persecution, these key themes. He tells us that Jesus is the example of one who suffered. Verse 21, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Jesus also suffered for you, leave you an example you

should follow in His steps." We're to follow Jesus in a life of suffering, particularly that comes through persecution.

Then chapter 3 verses 8 and 9 to show you this section is all about this issue of faithfulness in suffering, he says to sum up, chapter 3 verse 8, "To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead." Evil is being done to you. Don't return evil for evil. Insults are being hurled at you. Don't return insult for insult. But give a blessing to those who are persecuting you. Verse 14 of chapter 3, "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed." Verse 16, this is chapter 3:16, "keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong."

Then chapter 4, verse 1, "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." He's saying, listen, if you're a Christian, since Christ suffered, arm yourselves with the same purpose. You're going to suffer. That's not exactly what we would like to hear, is it? The Christian life is a call to suffering. It's a call to follow Jesus, and Jesus suffered. He continues on in verses 12 to 19 then about this same theme. So we've kind of caught ourselves up. Verses 7 to 11 was a parenthesis where he talked about relationships in the body of Christ but the rest of this section has been dealing with how we respond to the opposition of the world. Verses 7 to 11, he talked about how we help one another because time is short. In the midst of all of this opposition, we need to love one another fervently, be hospitable to one another, pray for one another, serve one another, and that's what we've been looking at for a number of weeks but now we jump back out of the parenthesis of how we treat one another back to dealing with the realities of life in Christ in a world opposed to Christ. So verse 12 of chapter 4,

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? 19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your word. We come to You today to sit before Your word, all of us, Lord, to humble ourselves before You as we have even done through confession of sin, been reminded of through Your Scripture to look at the glory of our Savior. We come asking that You might now teach us from Your word. Help us to be faithful followers of Jesus. For those that do not know You here today, Lord, that have not truly repented and believed, pray that You'd grant saving faith, genuine repentance. For those who belong to You, may we be more fervent in our faith, more earnest in our obedience, more broken before our great Savior and more willing to endure whatever's necessary to grow in our relationship with Him. We pray this in His name, amen.

So the title of the message this morning is "A Right Perspective on Suffering, A Right Perspective on Suffering in the Christian Life." It's what it means to suffer as a believer. We've seen that it's part and parcel of what is coming our way. Peter says this is what to expect. Jesus said, "If you're going to follow Me, you're going to experience what I experienced. The world hated Me because I am the light of the world, and the world's going to hate you." That's the reality. And so he's calling us along that path. So, a right perspective on suffering and today we're going to begin to look at this, it's going to take us more than one Sunday, but we're going to look at two points, two main points that we want to look at today for the Christian's suffering. How are we to see it? We're to move from seeing it the way that we naturally see it, which is wrong. Our default position needs to be corrected. We see suffering as bad. Now, in one sense, there's a sense in which in heaven, in the new heavens and new earth, there won't be suffering that's meaningless and pointless at all. There won't be suffering like there is now. There will be work. We're going to get tired. I don't know what it's going to be like exactly, but there won't be suffering that is brought about by evil. There will be no evil. But in this world, so we rightly see things that are evil and we recoil from them, but the message is that God sovereignly reigns over every single molecule in the universe, and he reigns over every bit of suffering that comes into the life of his people and it's not random and out of control. It is intentional, purposeful, and measured and if we change our perspective on that, we can be more faithful in the midst of suffering.

That's really the theme of this message, a right perspective on suffering, and as we begin to try to unpack this passage, we'll be looking at mostly verses 12 and 13 this morning. The first thing that we need to see, this first principle about suffering for the Christian, that we change our perspective. For the Christian, this is point number one, for the Christian, suffering is relational. Suffering is relational. It's not random. It's not that God has forgotten us. No, suffering is relational. And you see this in that first word when Peter starts this exhortation, "Beloved, do not be surprised." The word "beloved," something he addresses these same readers in chapter 2 verse 11, he says, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lust." Here he says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal." Beloved, we don't need to skip over that too quickly. He's about to give them some bad news again and I wonder if Peter was thinking when he was writing this, "I wonder how they're going to receive it." Sometimes I think about that when I'm preparing a message like this. I wonder how excited everybody's going to hear about more suffering. Good news. Hey, but the reality is, God's ways are better than our

ways, and his wisdom is perfect, and so whatever he brings into our life is better, and so if he says more suffering, it's because he wants to bless us more.

And Peter, as he writes, and he's about to bring again this continued exhortation to bear up under suffering, kind of bringing it to an end in this section, chapter 2 verse 11 all the way to chapter 4 verse 19, the main thrust has been how to live a godly life in a world that is opposed to you and he's bringing it to a kind of a climax and to an end, and he reminds them of his affection, "Beloved." The word here is the word *agapētos*. It comes from the Greek noun *agapē*. This adjective means those who are loved with *agapē* love, *agapētos*. This speaks of his love for the people to whom he writes. The apostle has deep affection for his readers, those whom he has ministered among at previous times in these churches that he's aware of, followers of Jesus. He has deep love for them. And I want us to think about this, though, because it's not just his love for them, it's also he's reminding them of God's love for them. Beloved. He's, in a sense, saying, "You are beloved of God." And I want three sub-points under this point. The point is, for the Christian, suffering is relational. Three sub-points, 1A, B, and C. 1A, you have a new relationship with God. If you belong to Jesus Christ, you have a new relationship with God. You are beloved of God. Peter's been making much of that in this letter. In fact, we noted that the large outline of the book of 1 Peter, we said 1:1 to chapter 2 verse 10 is about your identity in Christ, who you are. Chapter 2 verse 11 to the end of the book is about what you're to do, your responsibility and he said you must know who you are before you can do what you're supposed to do. You've got to understand who you are. And he's reminding them here in this point about, he's talking about responsibility, but he says, "I've got to remind you of who you are." If you're going to be able to bear up in suffering, you need to know that you are loved by God, beloved.

He told them that in so many ways in the earlier chapters. Chapter 1, verse 3, he tells them who they are, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." He's saying to the Christians to whom he writes, "You have been born again. You have a new Father. You are begotten of God." And he says in chapter 1 verse 4 you're going "to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." God has caused you to be born again. He's made you a part of his family. He's got an inheritance that he's keeping in heaven for you, and he's keeping you to bring you to that inheritance. That's who you are.

Look at chapter 1, he says in verse 14, "As obedient children," you're children of God, "do not be conformed to the former lusts," he says verse 14, "but be holy," verse 16. Verse 17 of chapter 1, "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear." You address the holy God as Father. He's reminding us. And this idea of beloved in chapter 4 verse 12 is capturing all of this that he said previously. You're beloved of God.

He reminds them again of their new birth in chapter 1 verse 23, "or you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." And this has made you a newborn baby. I love that image in chapter 2, verse 2, "as newborn babes long for the pure milk of the word."

You are God's children. You are his babies. You are those that belong to him. You are loved by God, beloved. If the gospel has come to you, if you have come to the point of repenting and believing by God's grace, turning from your sins, believing in the finished work of Christ, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners, you come to see to the end of yourself, to pray like we prayed earlier, along with the tax collector, "Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner." The essence of his prayer, literally in the Greek, it's not just "have mercy on me," it's literally "be propitiated toward me." We so seldom use that word in common vernacular that the translators feel the need to change it and say "have mercy on me," because people don't know what propitiated means. But what it means is this, literally it means, remember the Pharisee sitting there telling God all that he's done for the Lord, "Thank You that I'm not like other men," the Pharisee says. "I tithe, I keep Your law. I'm not like, certainly like this evil, this tax collector over here. Thank You that I'm not like him." And the tax collector will not even look to raise his eyes to heaven, but he has his head bowed and he beats his breast and he says, "Be propitiated toward me, the sinner." Be propitiated means, "Look at the sacrifice. Don't look at me, look at the sacrifice and have mercy on me." The sacrifice, propitiation, the sacrifice stands in the way of the wrath of God that we deserve. It takes God's wrath and judgment away. That's what the sacrifice is and this tax collector understands it. He sees himself as God sees him and he's in need of a sacrifice and he says, "Don't look at me, look at the sacrifice and then have mercy on me in light of the sacrifice." And that's the essence of salvation. When you come to understand that it's not look at you in any way, "Lord, don't look at me, look at the cross. Look at what Christ has done. I put all of my hope, all of my trust in His work, in who He is, in His life, in His death, and in light of that, have mercy on me." And Jesus says, "That man, I tell you, went to his house justified."

That's salvation and when that is your heart, you can know that God has caused you to be born again by his Spirit, and you are his child and you are in a relationship of love with him. Now there is no more wrath. It has been finished by Jesus Christ. There remains no more justice, no more record of wrongs. All your sins, past, present, and future, nailed to the cross, taken out of the way, so that when God looks upon the believer, he looks upon you as if you had lived the perfect, righteous life of Jesus and he loves you with the affection he has for his precious Son. And Peter is saying, "Know that when you look at your life, because your life doesn't seem to say that, especially when you enter into fiery trials." But the reality is God has settled that for all eternity in the cross, and he loves you. And in fact, he's going to say this fiery trial is actually a blessing. It's a blessing and a love gift from your Father.

So it's a new relationship with God. That's 1A. It's a new relationship with others, 1B. Suffering is relational. We have a new relationship with others. Peter says, beloved, and of course what he means first is, "I love you." He has love for them. The apostle has deep affection. He has the love of God in his heart for other brothers and sisters to whom he

writes and he's told them this in a number of places. He's reminded them already of the importance of the love that we're to have for one another. Chapter 1, verse 22, right before he reminds us of our new birth, in verse 23, he says in verse 22, chapter 1, "Since you have an obedience to the truth, purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." Since you have been, and he says, before you have been born again, verse 23, the reason you're to love one another from the heart is because you've been born again. You have a new nature and what are you to do now that you have a new nature? Love one another fervently from the heart. That's what we're called to do. And he reminds us again in chapter 2, verse 17, when he says, honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. We see that we're to honor all men, but we are to love the brotherhood. We're to honor the king, but we're to fear God.

It's a new relationship and in our section we were just in, chapter 4, the parenthesis in the midst of this larger passage about how to deal with suffering, when Paul says in verse 7, "The end of all things is near," because time is short, "be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." Verse 8, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." He says above all. First of all, your priority must be to, and remember we talked about this, it's not translated as well as it should be, keeping fervent love, having fervent love, go on holding fervent love and be ready to dispense it is the idea, and this is what I want you to do above everything else, keep fervent love for one another. Love the brotherhood, he's saying again, in the same way. And so now he says, beloved, because this is the relationships we're supposed to have with each other, that is that we're to walk through the fires, not alone. The fire of affliction comes, the beauty of God's wisdom in bringing us to be part of his people is we bear one another's burdens as we walk through life. You walk through the fire with God's Spirit, yes, but you also walk through the fire with God's people.

So he's saying, beloved, he's reminding them of his love and their love for one another; as they enter into these fiery trials, you need to know that you are loved and that we're to help one another, brothers and sisters in the furnace of affliction. These things should make us closer, not drive us apart. So then thirdly, the third, 1C, for the Christian suffering is relational, a new relationship with God, a new relationship with others, a new relationship with Christ, that is a deeper relationship with Christ. In that sense, it becomes new. As you go through suffering, if you do it rightly, if we do it rightly, we grow to know Jesus in a deeper, more real way. That's what he's getting at when he says, reading out of verse 12 into verse 13, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing." You're sharing the sufferings of Christ. He's saying that part of what is happening when you go through the fire is you are entering into the suffering.

Now, he's talking particularly about suffering that comes from persecution, that's specifically in the primary focus of Peter's heart, but it applies also to all suffering that comes to us because it all comes by the will of God; there's some sense in which these things apply in every suffering that the Christian goes through. And he's saying, though,

that when we suffer, there's an opportunity for us to experience fellowship with Jesus in a real and profound way.

The word translated "share, the sufferings of Christ," I'm reading the New American Standard, verse 12, when it says "share the sufferings of Christ," it's the Greek verb *koinoneo*, from which we get, from which the Greek noun *koinonia*, you may have heard, which means fellowship. *Koinoneo* is the verb form, which means to share fellowship. It's a joining together, a partnering with one another, a coming together, a yoking together. So, in fact, an easy way to remember it is the word *coin*. The English word *coin* comes from this Greek a noun, *koinos*, from which *koinoneo* and *koinonia* come from, *koinos* means common. A coin is common currency. And so *koinonia* is those things that we share in common. He says we share in common, when we suffer with Jesus, we share something now in a deeper way in common with him. He suffered for righteousness' sake and when we suffer for his name's sake, there's a sense in which we draw closer to him than we've ever been before and we know him in a deeper way. This is what Paul was talking about in Philippians 3:10 when he says, "that I may know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings." To know Jesus, to know him intimately, is to know him in the fellowship of his sufferings.

And so, all of these things are available to us as we enter into suffering and this is why, we're going to come to the second point, for the Christian suffering is not only relational, for the Christian suffering is redemptive. It is redemptive. It's productive. It's a blessing. That's his argument here. You could say it's also purposeful. I debated with redemptive or purposeful, so you can pick. Suffering is purposeful. It is redemptive. It comes from the phrase in verse 12 when he says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing." It comes upon you for the purpose of testing you or trying you, that is that there is a distinct and definite purpose for the fire.

It's interesting because it doesn't appear that way and I love the fact that Peter uses the word he uses for fire, translated fiery ordeal on the New American Standard, fiery trial, ESV and King James, New King James. I think painful trials is how the NIV translates it. I think fiery is key because the word for fire is here. But he uses the same, well, he uses the word fire in chapter 1, verse 6 and 7 when he talks about the refiner's fire imagery. Here he doesn't use the same word fire. He uses another stronger word for fire. He uses a word which means truly fiery ordeal. It means a burning. It pictures a destructive fire. It's interesting. In fact, I thought about this, why didn't the Lord put the word previously for fire and talk about a refiner's fire right away? Why did he use this word? "Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal." Now what you're going to see is the fiery ordeal is a refiner's fire. I think the reason he uses the word, though, is it doesn't look like a refiner's fire when it comes upon you. It doesn't look purposeful. It doesn't look redemptive when you enter into the fire.

It looks like this word is used three times in the New Testament, once here, twice in Revelation 18, to speak of the destruction of Babylon the great, burning and the smoke ascending as God's judgment falls upon it. It's a word that could be translated, and some commentators mention this, conflagration. It's a raging fire he's talking about. Don't be

surprised at the raging fire that comes upon you. A conflagration is an extensive, uncontrolled fire that destroys vast amounts of property and land. That's what this word means. It means a fire that is uncontrolled. Don't be surprised at the fire that appears to be uncontrolled and random. Don't be surprised.

Appearances don't match reality. I think about the fact that Peter wrote this, I mentioned in 63 AD, less than a year after he wrote these words, the great fire of Rome ranged in July of 64 AD. The great fire of Rome burned for a total of nine days. Six days, they put it out and then it reignited after a short period of time and burned for three more days. 71% of the city was destroyed, 10 of the 14 districts that made up Rome in the way it was structured were destroyed. Vast amounts of property, hundreds of lives lost, tragedy. And so he writes this, of course, Peter doesn't know that's going to happen, but he writes it in the providence of God and these early believers shortly after they receive it, hear about the fire of Rome and he says, "Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you as though some strange thing were happening to you."

It's important, the imperatives in this section, the imperative actually "do not be surprised," there it reads like an imperative in verse 12. Sometimes it doesn't in the English. That clearly does. "Do not be surprised." This word is an interesting word. It's a word which literally can be translated, "don't think it's strange." It's a verb form of the word *xenos*, which means stranger. In fact, the word, the noun, strange, comes up in the same verse. When he says, "Beloved, do not be surprised," he's basically saying, "Beloved, do not think it's strange at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing as though something strange were happening to you." Same word, same root word. The stranger, the unknown, the uncomfortable, the enemy, possibly. He's saying when you see this out of control, what appears to be an out of control fire in your life, and you look at it, it appears to be an out of control fire, apply your theology, believe the word, and know that it is not an out of control fire and it is not something strange that is happening to you, it is actually something that you should welcome.

Now, listen, this is the paradox of suffering. In one sense, we are not advocating that we are to suffer intentionally for Christ. No, we're not trying to make ourselves suffer. That is ungodly. But when God brings suffering upon the Christian, the Christian can know with certainty that the Lord has measured it out and that he's going to do something wonderfully redemptive in it. So he's saying, don't be surprised, don't think it's strange. The idea is it's counterintuitive, but this is absolutely necessary. It's not only not harmful, it's essential to make us what he wants us to be, to bless us.

This verb could be translated "to be astonished, to be amazed at the novelty of something." Don't be astonished at the fiery ordeal. Don't be amazed at it. Don't be completely undone, staggered by it as you experience it. As he's talking about something significant, a real trial of faith comes at you, he says don't let that stagger you. It's certainly going to hurt. You're going to need to mourn. Yes, if it's a loss of a loved one, or it's a diagnosis of some problem, or if it's rejection in a profound way, you lose your job because you're a Christian, your livelihood, whatever it is, he's saying, don't let that

stagger you with who you are in Christ. Why? Because the fire has come upon you for your testing. It's not random. It's come upon you for your testing.

This word translated testing, the New American Standard, is often translated trial. In fact, it's translated in chapter 1 and verse 6 when it says you have been distressed by various trials, same word. Trial, this testing. Here it's a verb form of the same word, the trial. It means to try, to test, to prove genuine. He's saying God has sent this to test and to prove the genuineness of your faith. What appears to be uncontrolled and random is in reality intentional, purposeful, and measured. In reality, what appears to be a firestorm that is out of control is in reality a precision instrument in the hand of your Father and he's wielding it exactly as he intends.

Think about the radical change of point of view. I mean, fire is terrifying. I mean, it's a wonderful thing when it's contained in a fire pit or a fireplace, right? We love it. Something about it, just comforting. But when a fire rages, you remember the fires that happened in Maui last summer? \$5.5 billion of damage, more than 100 lives lost, 2,200 structures destroyed. It got out of control and it raged and through some errors here and there in the emergency personnel, it did untold damage and people died in horrible ways. And you think about that, and that is terrifying and he's saying there's circumstances that are going to come into our lives that are going to be terrifying like that but you understand that in Jesus Christ, suffering cannot, cannot undo what God has done in your life. It cannot harm you, your faith, your eternal life. Nothing can touch you. The fire that he sends is only to purify and to bless.

Don't be surprised. That's the first imperative but he gives another imperative. He says, keep on rejoicing in verse 13, "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing." That's also a Greek imperative and it's the Greek present tense, both of these. In fact, the Greek present tense, remember, present tense in Greek is not so much about... tense in Greek is not so much about the time of the action as the kind of action. It's different than English. Present does mention time. It refers to time, but it mainly refers to the kind of action and the present tense verb is about continuous ongoing action. Both of these imperatives "do not be surprised" and "keep on rejoicing" are both Greek present tense verbs and when you have a Greek present tense verb that says do not be surprised, it means do not go on being surprised. You see the continuous action, do not go on being surprised. In other words, stop being surprised. He understands when it happens, what's happening we are being surprised, we are being staggered naturally, we're humans, we don't have the eternal perspective, we can't see the tapestry that God is weaving, and he says, "Stop being surprised. Stop being staggered. Remember who you are. Remember the ways of God and now change your viewpoint and now start rejoicing and keep on rejoicing."

Paul says in Philippians 4:4, in fact, Philippians is amazing how often he says this. He talks about rejoicing and joy all the time. I've been teaching that on Wednesday nights. We called the series "Surprised by Joy" because Paul is in prison, he's in terrible circumstances, he's got a Roman soldier chained to him 24 hours a day. Can you imagine what that would be like to have a human being chained to you 24 hours a day? Well, Paul

can. He experienced it. And in spite of that, he wrote the letter that is called the letter of joy and he says in that several times, rejoice. In Philippians 4:4, a easy verse to remember, to memorize. I'll help you right now if you've never memorized it, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" That's what Paul says. I love that. He says, rejoice in the Lord always. That's good enough. That's a command. That's an imperative. Rejoice in the Lord when? Most of the time? No, always. But then he says, that's not enough, "again, I say, rejoice!" That's what Peter's telling us. Keep on rejoicing. You have reason to rejoice because God is using this for your good. He's testing you. He's trying you. He's going to use this to bring you out the other side with a faith that is stronger and sounder and a love for Christ that is deeper and purer.

In fact, this word testing, "for your testing," chapter 4 verse 12, which comes upon you, "the fiery ordeal which comes upon you for your testing," the Greek word here first occurs in Genesis chapter 22 verse 1 in the Old Testament. Now, the Old Testament, remember, is written in Hebrew, but it's translated into Greek about 150 BC, and so you'll often hear people talk about the Septuagint, which is a Greek word for 70, the 70 scholars that translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek 150 years before Christ. And in the Septuagint, Genesis 22:1 is the first place you find this word, peirazo, which means to test, and it says there, "Now it came about at that time, after these things, that God tested Abraham." Now you remember what that test was. God tested Abraham by telling him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. But the passage begins with that statement, the summary of what was happening in that moment was God was testing him. Now think about that. That was a firestorm that came out of nowhere. Remember, he waited 25 years to have a son. God gives him a son. God had told him he was going to give him a son 25 years before. Think about 25 years when you're 75 to 100, how long that must have... Just waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. And finally, God gives him a son. They name him Isaac. Laughter. Play on words because Sarah laughed, but also because the bigger meaning, because a man 100 years old and a woman 90 years old and they had a baby, their first child. That's something to laugh about, to laugh with joy, the victory laugh, how good God is. He has the delight of his heart he's waited for, and all of the salvific hopes that he's been told about. He's going to be the father of a multitude of nations. Through him, his seed, all the families of the earth are going to be blessed. And Isaac, through him, that particular son, he's had Ishmael, this son, no, this is the son through whom salvation is going to come. And now Isaac's around 12 or 13 years old, and God tests Abraham. You look at it from Abraham's perspective, it was like, I mean, he knows God said it to him, but imagine the anguish of his heart when God says to him, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and take him to the mountains of Moriah, to the mountain I will show you, and offer him as a burnt offering there to Me." How his heart in an instant... I mean, God didn't appear to him that often. We don't know how often, but we have accounts of some of those; there may be some that aren't recorded in Scripture. Sometimes he waits years. And so here the Lord has appeared to him and is speaking to him, "I can't wait to hear what God has to say." And then God says that. "How can this be? It goes against everything that You've told me so far, everything that I've expected. All of my dreams, You're asking me to give them up." And it says Abraham, he goes to bed and it says that he got up early the next morning and saddled his donkey. He didn't wait around, he didn't waver, he got up early, saddles his donkey,

brings Isaac and two servants and they head to Moriah, the land of Moriah. And he deals with that all the way, the anguish of it and yet what's happening in his heart, he's wondering, "Why is this happening? Why has God done this? How can this be?" Don't you find yourself in circumstances where you ask those same questions, especially when you encounter a fiery trial? "Why is this happening? How can this be?"

The ways of God, God's way, because listen, as sinners, we don't understand how much sin blinds us, we don't understand how much sin holds us back from knowing and loving God and to extricate it takes precision surgery. It takes skill that's far beyond what the greatest brain surgeon can do when he cuts down to remove a tumor and tries to do no collateral damage. God is by a million times more skilled in what he does in the heart. And this was a precision storm for Abraham and so he takes him, Abraham, you remember, tells his friend, his servants, "You guys wait here. The boy and I are going to go over to the mountain and worship, and we will return to you." Faith against faith. He's holding on by his fingernails to the promise of God. He goes. He raises the knife. God says, "Abraham, Abraham, I know now that you have not withheld your own son, that you have loved Me and you've been faithful to Me." And he reiterates the promises. And then Abraham sees that God has given a ram there, and then Abraham comes to know God as Yahweh Yireh, the Lord who provides. And Abraham, according to Hebrews 11, receives Isaac back when he takes the knife down. And God tells him, "There's a ram over there, you're not going to offer Isaac," can you imagine what must have been happening as he untied his son from the altar? What joy, tears probably streaming down his face as he takes him off the altar and it says, Hebrews chapter 11 says that he received him back as a type. He receives him back off the altar, and he sees Isaac is a type, and the anti-type, the one he represents is Jesus, when God will send his Son, his only Son whom he loves, and give him. And this proves his faith. This deepens him. This firestorm actually makes Abraham know God better and love God more. And God stripped away the idolatry in his heart that would have made Isaac more precious to him than God.

You see, God, with a skill, an amazing skill, with his scalpel, pierces his heart, takes out the idolatry, and restores him now a deeper love for God. And Abraham, if you ask him, "Abraham, tell me about that firestorm. Wouldn't you wish God had never done that to you?" Abraham said, "You're speaking blasphemy. God does all things well and I would not trade anything that He has done. He showed me Jesus thousands of years before Christ was born because He took me to that mountain." And you remember, of course, I mentioned on Easter, the mountain, Mount Moriah, later became Jerusalem, 2,000 years later, Jesus is crucified on Mount Moriah, Calvary. God putting it all together, but the issue is the fire makes his children come closer to him and what do we need more than that? What do you want more than that? To have an easy life but to not know God? No, to know God, to know the Lord, whatever he brings.

In fact, let me show you this in James chapter 2. I want to show you how this makes sense of something that sometimes people stumble over, what James is talking about in James chapter 2 where he says Abraham was justified by works. James chapter 2 verse 18, you'll sometimes hear people say, particularly this is an argument that Roman Catholics who are well-versed in the Scriptures will argue that our gospel of justification

by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that is faith apart from works, they'll say is not right, and they'll point to a verse like this but they misread the Scriptures to their own destruction, because I'm going to show you what he's talking about here and how he's... James does not contradict Paul. James agrees with Paul. James complements Paul, and James says something that Paul says actually in Ephesians 2:8, 9, and 10, he says the same thing James is saying in chapter 2 of James. Read 2:8, 9, and 10 later and you'll see this, but I'm going to just tell you what's happening here. Verse 18. Chapter 2, James 2:18, "But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'" James was concerned about people who professed faith in Christ but were not exhibiting changed lives, that is, they were not growing in grace. It doesn't mean he was looking for perfection, but there were people who were saying, "Hey, I've trusted in Jesus," but they lived like Jesus didn't matter and James is saying, "If that's the case, I question whether or not you have saving faith," because saving faith, though it's apart from works, it's not works, it's faith alone, but faith which is genuine will not remain alone. It will be accompanied on the other side of salvation by good works.

And this is what James is getting at here in this passage. Verse 21, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" This is the test we just talked about, right? He's saying Abraham was justified, that is, what he's really getting at and I'm going to show you this in a second, he's saying that Abraham's faith was proved genuine when he offered up Isaac on the altar. Look, follow the logic here. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected," verse 23, "and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God." He points back to chapter 15, verse 6. We were looking at chapter 22 which occurs more than 25 years after chapter 15. Chapter 15 is when Abraham was saved. He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Romans chapter 4, Galatians chapter 3, make this clear. This is where Abraham was saved. He heard the promise of God, he believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness. God's testing of Abraham proved, deepened and proved genuine the faith that he already had and that's what James is saying. James is saying, "Listen, I'm concerned about some of you," to whom he writes, he's also writing, like the author of Hebrews, to a mostly Jewish believer audience and he's saying, "I'm concerned that some of you say you have faith, but you aren't living holy lives. You aren't concerned about your sin. You aren't trying to put your sin to death. If that's the case, I wonder if you have faith because faith will work." You're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, but faith will not remain alone. So Abraham is saved in Genesis 15 when he's 85 years old, and then when he's about 112 or 113, almost 30 years later, his faith is proved genuine in the test.

So back to 1 Peter, what he's saying, listen, when God brings a fire, what he's doing is he's giving you an opportunity to see the genuineness of your faith. So you come out the other side, when you encounter affliction and you cling to Christ, what happens is you grow in your love for him, you grow in your love for others, and your faith is being proved genuine by your holding on. You come out the other side and you know that you

know that you know Jesus and you know him way better than you knew him on the other side of the fire. That's the purpose of God. That's why he says, "Don't think it... Why are you thinking it's a strange thing? Don't you see this is the plan?" This is how God has worked all throughout Scripture. I mean, that's one test of Abraham. He tested him other ways. Look at Jacob. Look at Joseph. Look at David. Look at all of his people. He takes you through the fire and those who love him, the fire proves their faith, deepens their faith. So when we find ourselves going into a firestorm, what we need to do is get a right perspective on it. "Wait a minute. Remember who I am. I belong to God. He loves me. He's told me that all things work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, and His purpose is that we be conformed to the image of Jesus. We look more like him and we have deeper fellowship with Him." Everything is aimed at that. God is so good that he doesn't give us what we want because if we're honest, don't you and I want things just to go well? I do. I get disappointed by the silliest things and God's like, "What you need is more of Me and I'm determined that you will have more of Me." So when we're faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for the wonder of the salvation that You've given us in Christ Jesus. Your grace is staggering, Lord, that You would save sinners like us who are rebellious, we were haters of God, and yet You loved us, and You gave us Your Son. Lord, help us to see and to receive and to obey what we've heard, that we would be doers of the word, that we would change the way we see suffering, that we would welcome it, not in a masochistic way, but in a faithful way, that whatever You bring, we trust You. We love You. We know You know what's best. May we wake up each day ready to do the good works that You set before us so that Christ might be glorified. Father, for those that are here that maybe adversity has caused them to turn away from You, haven't been running to You, Lord, help them to search their hearts; perhaps they're just being obstinate believers like we all can be, resisting You and Your Spirit. Grant them repentance. But Lord, if You're uncovering unbelief, help them cry out to You for salvation.