

## **Beloved, Respond to Suffering**

I Peter 4:12-14

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.”

Have you ever used a magnifying glass in the sunlight? On a sunny day, you can start a fire with a magnifying glass. I remember when I was a small child this fascinated me. How could this happen? The sun didn't burn me, but with a magnifying glass the sun can start fires. Of course, as I grew older I understood that the glass lens focuses the rays of the sun. When the sun's rays are focused like that, they are able to accomplish something they could not otherwise accomplish.

In suffering, our focus is usually scattered. But Christianity gives us a lens through which we are to view suffering. When we view suffering through the lens of Christianity, it takes on a new power and leads us to surprising results.

In these I Peter 4:12-14 God instructs Christians on how to respond to suffering. Suffering for Christ's sake should not surprise us, should cause us to

rejoice, and is a happy state. How can this possibly be true? Let's look closely what the Bible teaches us in these verses.

We are going to begin by looking at two words that will set the stage for the instructions found in these verses. The two words are: "Beloved" and "Trial"

Verse 12 begins with the word, "Beloved." This word is agapaytos, speaking of agape love, that selfless, self-sacrificing love.

Peter cared deeply for these Christians. He was invested in their lives. He wrote not one, but two letters to these Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor to instruct them in the Christian faith and to encourage and strengthen them as they suffered for the Gospel's sake. Peter cared for them.

More importantly, God cared deeply for these Christians. Peter was the human author of this epistle, but it was Divinely inspired. Peter was not merely writing to those he loved, but to the beloved of God.

Christian, when you read I Peter 4:12, stop at that first word, "Beloved," and realize that it is speaking about you. This passage goes on to talk about suffering for Christ's sake. We will be told to not think of suffering as strange. We will be told to rejoice as partakers of Christ's sufferings. We will be told we are happy if we are reproached for Christ's sake. But before we get there we must understand where this verse starts.

To respond biblically to suffering, you must be firmly grounded in this truth: You, Christian, are the beloved of God. God's love for you transcends your

circumstances. God's love for you isn't based on what you are experiencing. God's love for you isn't based on how you feel. God's love for you isn't based on how good your life is right now or how bad your life is right now. God's love for you, Christian, was settled in eternity past. No matter what suffering you face in this life for the sake of Christ, take comfort and rest in God's love for you. "Beloved," it is a key word to understand the instruction that follows.

The next key word is "trial." The middle of verse 12 mentions: "the fiery trial which is to try you." The Greek word that's translated there literally means, "To set on fire."<sup>1</sup> It was used to speak of the refining process. Just like metal ore is put into a fiery furnace and melted down to drive out the impurities, so God wants to refine us.

The trials spoken of here are not intended to break us. They are to refine us. They are to purify us. Suffering for the sake of Christ purifies and strengthens the individual Christian, the local church, and the entire body of Christ here on earth. Suffering is blessed. Fiery trials are cause for rejoicing. The refining fire is to be embraced.

This seems to be a paradox, yet this is what the Bible teaches, and we embrace it as truth. History has affirmed this truth. Around 200 A.D. Tertullian famously wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."<sup>2</sup> There have

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<sup>1</sup> *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. IV, p. 155

<sup>2</sup> *Apologeticus*, Tertullian

been those who have contradicted this statement. I read a study recently that found no direct correlation between persecution and church growth.<sup>3</sup> But the study was flawed because they were looking at church growth as an increase in numbers, not spiritual growth. Not the magnification of God's glory.

Persecution grows the church as it magnifies God's glory here on earth. Thomas Watson wrote, "The glory of Christ's kingdom does not stand in worldly pomp and grandeur, as other kings; but it is seen in the cheerful sufferings of his people."<sup>4</sup> When you study Church history you see that wherever persecution has blown the hardest, there the flames of faith have burned the brightest. The words of Christ from Matthew 16:18 have proven true over and over and over again. The very gates of hell have not, and will not, prevail against Christ's church.

"Trial," a test designed to refine and strengthen. This is a key word to understand the instruction that follows.

Christian, you are the beloved of God. The fiery trial is not intended to destroy but to refine and strengthen. With that foundation set, let's look at the instruction given in these verses.

The first instruction is found in verse 12: "Think it not strange." We shouldn't be surprised when fiery trials come upon us. Verse 12 goes on and says, "As if some strange thing happened unto you." "Happened" means, "to fall by

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/december/sorry-tertullian.html>

<sup>4</sup> *A Body of Divinity*, p. 22, Thomas Watson

chance.”<sup>5</sup> Suffering for Christ’s sake doesn’t just happen. God is sovereign, He is in control, and He has allowed or designed this persecution to come. See here the comfort there is in the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. Nothing is outside of God’s control.

The two words translated here in verse 12 as “strange” are different Greek words, but only slightly. The first word is derived from the second. Strong’s Dictionary says that the words mean “foreign or alien, strange.” This same word is used back in I Peter 4:4 where we are taught that the world will think of us Christians as “strange” when we do not join with them in sin. This word is also used in Hebrews 11:13 where people of faith are called “strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” We should not think of trials, fiery trials, as foreign, alien, or strange.

I’m afraid Peter would not be a very popular preacher today. People want blessings, not trials. Certainly not fiery trials. People want their best life now, and book sales prove it. Joel Olsteen’s book with that title was #1 on the New York Time’s Best seller list for two years. Millions and millions of people bought that book. It was well received because it offered a comfortable god that appealed to the world.

People want God to smooth the bumps out of the broad road and open up the gates of glory for them at the end of the way. God is treated like a means to an end.

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<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur’s Study Bible, notes on I Peter 4:12.

He is reduced from the Sovereign to the supporter. He is treated like a tool to make life easier.

Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us that the reality of the Christian life is far different. He says, “Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.” Suffering is not alien to the Christian life. Suffering and faith go hand-in-hand down the narrow way that leads to life.

Turn back just a few pages in your Bibles to Hebrews 11. We are going to look at this chapter quickly. Hebrews 11 is known as the “Hall of Faith.” It mentions several saints and their remarkable faith. As we quickly skim through this chapter, I want us to consider the suffering that accompanied the accounts of faith recorded here.

Hebrews 11:4 tells us of Abel’s faith: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.” We know that Able’s brother, Cain, killed him because of his faith.

Verse 7 tells us of Noah’s faith: “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” For this faith Noah suffered ridicule and rejection for over 100 years. He was vindicated in the end, but what a trial he endured!

We go on and read about Abraham's faith. Hebrews 11:17 tells us Abraham faced a trial of faith when God told him to offer up Isaac.

Verse 25 tells us that Moses, because of his faith, chose to suffer with the Israelites rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin as a son of Pharaoh.

Consider Hebrews 11:35-38, "Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Note the suffering that is recorded here.

Throughout history, faith and suffering have gone hand-in-hand. This is not simply an Old Testament phenomenon. The New Testament is full of teaching and examples of suffering as well.

Jesus suffered. If faith would insulate anyone from suffering, surely it would insulate the only man who ever lived a perfect life. Yet Christ suffered. He suffered for us. He suffered in the perfect plan of God the Father.

Jesus also taught that His followers would suffer. Jesus said in Luke 6:22, "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from

their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.”

The early church suffered. Peter and John were arrested unjustly in Acts 4. All the apostles were arrested in Acts 5. The early church suffered and was scattered by persecution in Acts 8.

The apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 11:24-27, “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

That’s an awful lot of suffering. It’s too bad Paul isn’t around today to hear that God wants him to be comfortable and prosperous.

Church history tells us that all but one of the apostles went on to die as martyrs. Paul wrote to Timothy in II Timothy 3:12, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

In our text this morning, I Peter 4:12, we are told to not expect this trend to change. You cannot build a bridge of earthly blessings that reaches to heaven.

There is only one way, the way of the cross of Jesus Christ, and it is a suffering way.

You can't build walls around the blessings of Christianity and keep out the fiery trials. Such walls won't stand. They will come down like the walls of Jericho or the tower of Siloam. They cannot stand any sort of serious biblical scrutiny. Fiery trials are a part of the life of faith. I Peter 4:12 instructs us: "Think it not strange."

We can do that. We can set our jaw and brace ourselves for the coming "trials." We can expect fiery trials and be ready for them. We can endure. But this text goes on. Look at what it says in the next verse, verse 13.

I Peter 4:13 instructs us to rejoice as partakers of Christ's sufferings. Verse 13 begins with instruction that is foreign to the natural man while suffering: "But rejoice."

Verse 12 told us, "Think it not strange" when you suffer, but that is not enough. Christianity does not merely neutralize our reaction to suffering. We are not instructed to move from a negative reaction to a neutral reaction. Christianity moves us to respond positively when we suffer for Christ's sake. We are instructed to respond positively to suffering: "Rejoice."

The word that is translated here as "rejoice" is a common word in the New Testament and means, "To be cheerful."<sup>6</sup> It is the word most often translated in the

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New Testament as “rejoice.” There is no mistake. There is no debate. There is no deep and complex mystery in this instruction. It says what it means and means what it says: “Rejoice” in suffering.

How can this be? How can we rejoice in suffering? In the rest of verse 13 Peter holds up the lens of Jesus Christ through which we must view our suffering. As we consider our suffering through the lens of Christ, this call to rejoice comes into focus. We see that this is not only reasonable instruction, but also blessed instruction.

As we suffer for Christ, we partake in Christ’s sufferings. Verse 13 says, “But rejoice inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings.” This does not mean, it cannot mean, that we are partakers of Christ’s suffering for sin upon the cross. Christ is the only sin-bearer. As Peter and John said in Acts 4:12, “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” We cannot suffer as Christ suffered for atonement.

However, we can share in His sufferings as a man. Jesus suffered for doing what was right. In John 10 the Jews wanted to stone Jesus. Jesus asked them in John 10:32, “Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me?” So Christians can and will suffer for doing what is good and right.

Jesus was rejected and despised. Isaiah, prophesying of Jesus, said, “He is despised and rejected of men” (Isaiah 53:3). John 1:11 tells us, “He came unto his

own, and his own received him not.” So Christians can and will suffer rejection and be despised for following Jesus Christ.

Jesus suffered physically. He was beaten and hung upon a cross to die. So Christians can and have suffered physically for following Jesus Christ.

When we suffer for Christ’s name, we are partakers of Christ’s sufferings. As partakers in Christ’s sufferings, we will be partakers in Christ’s glory. By that, I do not mean that somehow we will receive a portion of the glory that is due to Christ and Christ alone. Rather, just as verse 13 says, when Christ’s glory is revealed, those who are partakers of Christ’s sufferings will be glad with exceeding joy.

What is this talking about: “When his (Christ’s) glory shall be revealed?” This is speaking of Christ’s second coming. Jesus said in Matthew 24:30, “They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Jesus again, in Matthew 25:31 said, “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory.”

Jesus Christ is coming back. Jesus came the first time as the meek and quiet lamb of God, sent to suffer and die. When Jesus Christ comes the second time, He will come as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. John wrote prophetically of Christ’s second return in Revelation 19:11-16, “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on

his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

When Jesus returns, his glory will be on display for all to see. For the unbelieving world, this will be a time of fear and desolation. God’s grace will be withdrawn. Sinners will receive the just judgment they deserve. When Christ returns there will be no discussion. There will be no debate. Men will not try to explain away what has happened. There will be no theories and no new philosophy. Christ’s glory will be on full display in the world and the wicked and unbelieving will not be able to stand against Him.

At the same time, while the world trembles, the Christian will be glad. We rejoice in suffering because we know such suffering is only temporary. Our Lord suffered and we count it an honor to suffer like Him and for Him. In Acts 5 when the apostles were arrested and beaten for preaching in Jesus name they rejoiced that “they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). Paul

wrote in Romans 8:18, “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

At Christ’s return, we will be glad with exceeding joy. The word at the end of verse 13 that is translated as “glad” in the KJV is the exact same word that is translated as rejoice in the first part of the verse. If we rejoice and are glad now when we suffer for the sake of Christ, how many multiple times more will we be glad and rejoice when Christ has returned and His full glory has been revealed for all to see? Verse 13 tells us how glad we will be. We will be glad “with exceeding joy.”

Thomas Watson wrote, “If there be so much delight in God, when we see him only by faith (I Peter 1:1) what will the joy of vision be, when we shall see him face to face! If the saints have found so much delight in God while they were suffering, oh what joy and delight will they have when they are being crowned! If flames are beds of roses, what will it be to lean on the bosom of Jesus! What a bed of roses that will be!”<sup>7</sup>

In our text God instructs Christians on how to respond to suffering. The first instruction given is found in verse 12: “Think it not strange.” The second in verse 13: “Rejoice.” Finally, verse 14 tells us, “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye.”

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, p. 27.

What makes you happy? That's an interesting question. People wear themselves out trying to figure out what makes them happy. Advertising campaigns work hard to make you believe that the product they are selling will make you happy. Many Americans are in tremendous amounts of debt because they spent money they didn't have to buy things that didn't need because they thought it would make them happy. Others pinch and scrape and save every penny they can because they believe money will make them happy. It is a vain pursuit. Solomon literally wrote the book on it, the book of Ecclesiastes. It's all vanity and vexation of spirit.

But back to the question: "What makes you happy?" That may seem like a shallow question, and maybe it is a shallow question. But if you ask yourself, "What makes me happy?" and you honestly answer that question, you will have a good idea of where you are at spiritually.

The word that is translated here as "happy" Strong's defines as "supremely blest; by extension, fortunate, well off: blessed, happy." Here in our text Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says that persecution is a happy state for a believer.

Verse 14 tells us that we are happy when we are reproached for the name of Christ. What does it mean to be reproached? I looked this word up in Strong's dictionary and it said the Greek word used here means, "to defame, rail at, chide, taunt: cast in teeth, reproach, revile, upbraid."

Wow. Does that happen today? Indeed it does, and it seems to be getting more and more common where we live.

In America there has been a period of over 200 years of incredible peace and freedom for Bible-believing Christians. Such freedom from persecution has not been the norm throughout church history. The history of the church has been a bloody history. Christians have routinely been called upon to give their lives for their faith.

In America today we do not face the same sort of physical persecution that the believers who first received this epistle faced. But more and more we face the persecution that is spoken of in verse 14. More and more, Christians are reproached for the name of Christ.

There was a time when association with a church would give you a certain amount of social currency in America. Being associated with a church made you respectable. Going to church gave you standing in the community. Going to church opened up business opportunities. It was odd if you didn't have some sort of religious affiliation.

Now the pendulum of culture has swung the other direction. Being associated with a Bible-believing, Bible-teaching church makes you suspect. Being faithful to a body of believers makes you an oddity. Bible-believing Christians run the risk of losing their livelihood over issues of conscience. Bible-believing Christians are shunned by a ever-growing number of people.

It is sad to see how so many who are so ignorant about the Word of God and the God of the Word blindly attack all things Christian. In attacking the church, they attack Christ.

Remember what Jesus said to Saul on the road to Damascus. “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *the church*?” No.

“Why persecutest thou *Christians*?” No.

“Why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4).

Any attack against the church is an attack against Christ.

On one hand we should be grieved that Christ is treated so badly. On the other hand, this verse tells us that when we suffer reproach for the name of Christ, we are in a happy state.

Why? Why are we happy? We are not happy for the sake of the persecution. We are not called to rejoice under persecution and suffering for the sake of persecution and suffering. This isn't a matter of semantics. God isn't trying to just change the meaning of pain and pleasure for us. We have reason to be happy and rejoice in the midst of persecution. Why are we happy? The end of verse 14 tells us. Look at the second part of verse 14: “For the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.”

We see two reasons here for our happy state.

First, God is present in our suffering. Matthew Henry's Commentary makes this comment: “This glorious Spirit *resteth upon you*, resideth with you, dwelleth

in you, supporteth you, and is pleased with you; and is not this an unspeakable privilege?" God doesn't try to explain the suffering away. Rather, in this text we are given a new perspective, a lens through which to view our suffering.

What is that lens? "The spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." The Holy Spirit indwells all believers, and in times of persecution He supernaturally enables the Christian to endure suffering for the glory of God. Triumphant suffering is a sign of God's presence and approval. How could we not be happy? No matter how great the suffering, no matter how terrible the persecution, the wonder of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of glory and of God, resting upon us transcends it all and leaves us in a happy state.

The second reason we are happy is that as Christ is blasphemed by His persecutors, He is glorified by his suffering saints. There is nothing better than the glory of God. There is no pursuit more noble than to glorify God. There is no higher calling than to glorify God. To this end were we created. All of God's creation ultimately brings glory to Him. As the Westminster Catechism says: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

To this end were we redeemed. Christians have a special privilege and responsibility to glorify God. Peter has already taught on this topic in this epistle. I Peter 1:3 tells us that we have been born again into the family of God. I Peter 2:9 tells us that we are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a

peculiar people. To what end? That we might show forth the praises of God. We are to glorify God in the world.

When we patiently enduring suffering for the name of Christ, we glorify God. If your heart is set on the things of this world or the approval of men, such suffering is bitter, but if your heart is set on glorifying God, such suffering is sweet. We are happy because in our suffering God is glorified.

From our text, I Peter 4:12-13, we have seen instruction from God to us, as Christians, on how to respond to suffering.

We began by looking at two key words that help us understand the instruction we receive in this passage. First, the word “beloved.” Christian, you are the beloved of God. God’s love for you transcends your circumstances. God’s love for you, Christian, was settled in eternity past. Second, we looked at the word “trials.” This words speaks of the refining process. The fiery trial is not intended to destroy but to refine and strengthen.

With that foundation set, we moved on to the instruction given in these verses. The first instruction we looked at from verse 12: “Think it not strange.” Suffering is not alien to the Christian life. Suffering and faith go hand-in-hand. This is the way it has always been and this is the way it will be until we are with Christ in glory.

The second instruction we looked at from verse 13: “Rejoice.” As we partake in Christ’s sufferings, we partake in Christ’s glory. This is cause for great rejoicing!

The third instruction we looked at from verse 14: “Happy are ye.” We are happy because the Holy Spirit rests upon us in a special way in times of trials and persecution. We are happy because in our persecution we have an opportunity, by the grace of God manifested in our lives, to glorify Him.

As we view suffering through the lens of Christianity, it takes on new power and leads to surprising results.

Our example in all of this is Jesus Christ Himself. He led the way as the lamb of God, sent into the world to suffer for our sins. May we, by God’s grace, heed the instruction from this passage of Scripture, and follow His example in faithful suffering.