

1 Peter 4:12-19 – The Fiery Ordeal – Richard Condie

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Introduction

The pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance of pain and suffering is one of the great quests of modern life. In fact, many in the western world today, use this paradigm, for making the biggest decisions of their lives. What makes me feel pleasure, and leads me away from discomfort, is seen as the good and the right.

You hear it in many of contemporary debates about social issue like abortion, euthanasia, the nature of marriage, and human sexuality. What brings me pleasure and reduces my pain is now considered to be the best way to live.

It wasn't always like this. Until relatively recently, the Western worldview was more concerned guilt and innocence - a strong sense of doing what was right and avoiding doing what was wrong. This was often with reference to an external code – the laws and norms of the world. And in fact, if you grew up prior to the 1960's then this is probably how you still view the world.

All of that has now been swept away by the pleasure/pain principle. The modern worldview shapers and decision makers today, are less likely to ask: "Is it right or wrong?" (especially as measured by an external code like the 10 commandments) and more likely to ask, "Will it bring pleasure or pain?"

The euthanasia debate about to hit the Tasmanian Parliament is a case in point. The whole draft legislation is based on the idea of removing pain from the human experience, and does not even consider whether it falls into a category or right or wrong.

Now it is not my purpose today to debate these matters, but to deal with reality. Because it seems to me that there is no way we can avoid suffering in our lives. And even though our world tries to promise endless pleasure, this seems to me to be a false promise. We will all suffer. And the sooner we work out how to face it, the better off we will be.

The Apostle Peter confronts this issue head-on in our reading from 1 Peter 4 this morning. His focus is particularly on suffering for being a follower of Christ, but in it, some profound lessons for our lives.

I have four observations from our text today, and then some reflections on responding to suffering. It would be great for you to have your bible open to 1 Peter 4:12-19.

My first observation is about:

1. The Ordinariness of Suffering v 12

Very tenderly and full of compassion Peter says: ¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

We don't know exactly what fiery trials the Christians of the dispersion in Asia Minor were facing, but the description is probably enough for us. "Fiery trial" is pretty vivid. But reading between the lines, and knowing the history of the period, persecution for their faith is probably our best guess.

But the main point Peter makes is that suffering like this is perfectly normal, in fact, to be anticipated. They are not to be "surprised" as if something "strange were happening" to them.

The mistake we sometimes make is that with all the wonderful blessings of salvation, that have been so well spoken of in this letter; the protection of God, his goodness and kindness, his blessings; that somehow we will be immune from suffering. In fact today, some churches preach a "health and wealth" gospel. That if you trust in Jesus, all your problems and health issues, and poverty will fall away. It is sometimes known as a "prosperity gospel".

But Peter takes issue with it, letting us know that suffering is part of the normal Christian life. We should expect to face suffering and fiery trials of all kinds. These might be the sufferings of natural disasters, like a viral pandemic, or a tsunami. They might be because of our stupidity – like not taking enough care of our health when we were young. And they might be because we follow Jesus Christ and end up suffering in his name.

George Whitfield was a great evangelist in 18th century in Britain and North America, and as new convert at Oxford University, wrote the following:

.. when religion began to take root in my heart, and I was fully convinced my soul must totally be renewed ... I was visited with outward and inward trials ... I incurred the displeasure of the Master of the College ... who threatened to expel me, if I ever visited the poor again ...

My relations ... counted my life madness.

I daily underwent contempt at college. Some have thrown dirt at me ... two friends forsook me.¹

Many of us will identify with this. So why does it happen?

We turn to

2. The Purpose of Suffering v12- 14

Please notice the little word "test" in v 12. "the fiery ordeal taking place among you to test you".

¹ I am indebted to Peter Adam for these quotes:

<https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/trusting-god-in-suffering-sacrifice-disease-and-death-a-lost-art/>

Peter's assertion is that one purpose of suffering is so that we may be "tested". The word he uses is best understood as "testing" in the sense of "an attempt to learn the nature or character of something".²

Suffering tests us to reveal our character and true nature. It is like the refining of gold where it is heated up for the impurities to be burnt off, so that just the pure gold remains. Some have suggested these verses are Peter expounding his own thoughts from Chapter 1. Remember there in verses 6&7?

⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

By suffering, our character, and the genuineness of our faith is revealed, by the way we withstand it, or not.

After outlining his sufferings for being a Christian at Oxford, Whitfield said:

'These, though little, were useful trials. They inured me to contempt, lessened self-love and taught me to die daily'. He saw them as lessons to teach him to depend on Christ, to toughen him up, and help him to know the proper pathway of daily death.

Which, incidentally, is what Peter says next in verse 13. A purpose of suffering is so that we identify with Christ. ¹³*But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.*

In our sufferings, we walk where Christ has walked. As Christians we die to self and live to God. Suffering, whether being reviled for the name of Christ, pushed aside because of our faith, ridiculed as irrelevant, pilloried for being old fashioned, or even beaten and put to death on account of his name, as some are every day, reminds us of who we follow. We are blessed, Peter says in 14, because it is a sign of the Spirit resting on us.

There are of course,

3. The Limits to Godly Suffering v 15

which is my next observation. Look with me at verse 15.

¹⁵*But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker.*

The point is, our suffering is not going to lead us to growth in God, or nearness to Christ, if it comes about because of our sinful behaviour. Doing wrong and suffering the consequences, while it might have some value in character formation, is not what is on view here.

Peter's concern is when our discipleship causes us to suffer.

The last observation I will make is about:

² BGAD.

4. The Judgement in Suffering v 17-18

This is not where you might have expected the text to go. But in verse 17 Peter says this: ¹⁷ *For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

Judgement, beginning with the people of God is a bit of a bible theme. We see it in Jeremiah 25, and Ezekiel 9, where the Lord judges his own people in the temple, before that judgement flows over to the world. He cleanses his own. He purifies his own people. It is only then that he moves to judging the world. The quote in verse 18, from Psalm 11 puts the contrast well.

¹⁸ *And*

*“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?”*

The connection with suffering is this. The suffering we endure, is to be seen by us as discipline, as judgement, as the chastising of God against our sin. It is supposed to lead us to repentance.

Jesus himself said this in Luke 13. When asked about people who had been persecuted by Pilate and some on whom the Tower of Siloam had fallen, Jesus said that they were no worse sinners than anyone else, but that the message was “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

When we see disaster. When we suffer, for being a Christian. When it tests our faith. When we participate with Christ’s suffering. When we are reviled and ridiculed for our faith. It is a forewarning of the judgement to come, and a sign to us, that we should repent and turn to God.

John Fletcher, who was vicar of Madeley, from 1760-85, lay ill, and was visited by a friend who said: ‘I am sorry to find you so ill.’ Fletcher answered him with great sweetness and energy:

“Sorry”, sir! Why are you sorry? It is the chastisement of my heavenly Father, and I rejoice in it. I love the rod of my God, and rejoice therein, as an expression of his love and affection towards me.

He knew it was a chance to grow closer to God in godly fear and obedience. Such is the connection of suffering and judgement.

We have seen the ordinariness of the suffering, the purpose of suffering, the limits to godly suffering and the judgement in suffering, so now, how do we respond?

Responding to Suffering

The extraordinary thing about our text today are the words associated with how we are to suffer. Rather than endurance and gritting our teeth, or even withstanding discomfort, the words used of suffering in 1 Peter 4 are: rejoicing, blessing, glorifying, entrusting.

You see rather than the modern world view of avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, Peter knows that the suffering pathway is ultimately one of joy, because it leads us to greater trust and a deeper walk with God.

Most of us complain when suffering comes. We wallow in our discontent. We happily tell of our agony to others. We share our war stories of persecution to gain sympathy. I Well at least that's what I do.

But Peter's vision is to thank God, to rejoice because we know the ultimate trajectory of all this. To seek blessing. It is the pathway to true pleasure. Listen again to verse 13

¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

Shai Linne is Black American Christian Hip Hop artist, who wrote a very moving piece³ on the Gospel Coalition website this week, about his pain and struggle as a black man in America, in light of the death of George Floyd. I encourage you to read the whole article.

But just before the end he says these very powerful words about suffering:

So, brothers and sisters, in a nutshell, I'm so thankful for Jesus. I deserve to be consumed, but I'm not, because of God's compassion. That's what the cross and resurrection are all about. My pain and trauma are real. But my salvation, in a sense, is even more real, because my pain and trauma are temporary. My salvation is eternal. This is why I choose to focus on what I do in my music. It's the glory of God, the supremacy of Jesus Christ, the centrality of the cross, and biblical theology that put my experience as a black man in America into its proper perspective.

As Peter says:

¹⁹ Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

Let us entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator this day and in the days to come, that he might be glorified in our lives.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/george-floyd-and-me/>