

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER “FIERY TRIALS”

4 ¹²Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery trials among you (that have come for the purpose of testing you), as though a strange thing has happened to you. ¹³On the contrary, since you are participating in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice; so that at the revelation of his glory you may indeed rejoice with exultation. ¹⁴If you are denounced for the name of Christ, you are blessed; because the Spirit of glory, indeed, the [Spirit] of God, is resting upon you. ¹⁵May none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer, nor as a troublemaker. ¹⁶But if [anyone should suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; rather, let him glorify God by this name. ¹⁷The time has come to begin the judgment with the house of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸Indeed, [as it is written,] “If the righteous are barely saved, what will happen to the godless man and the sinner?” ¹⁹Therefore, let those who are suffering in accordance with the will of God commit their souls in doing what is right to a faithful Creator. (1 Pet. 4:12-19)

Introduction

Maybe you can identify with the English merchant who placed the following notice in his store window:

We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of government control and bad debtors. We have been cussed and discussed, messed with, lied to, held up, robbed, and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next. (*Our Daily Bread*, 3/26/92)

Maybe you do not find it as humorous as this English merchant; rather, you find the adversities you encounter to be unexpected and shocking, and you ask, “Why is this happening to me?”

When asked what trends he saw among Christian men today, an astute Christian identified three: 1) a faulty concept of God; 2) unrealistic expectations; and 3) incredible hurt when tragedies come into their lives. He writes: “When their business collapses, when their health fails, or their children die, they feel God has let them down” (*POWER*, 5/3/92, p. 8.)

It seems that many contemporary Christians assume that there is a verse in the Bible that reads:

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily,
The Christian life is like a dream!

This is a view of the Christian life that is very appealing—the full and immediate experience of heaven on earth. It is a view that to a large extent has been promoted by the church; when we are told, “God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life!” it can be easily misconstrued, if it is not carefully and fully explained in biblical terms.

Here you go, merrily, merrily, merrily rowing your boat gently down the stream of life, when suddenly (and unexpectedly) you hit the rapids of trial. You are thrown against the rocks of adversity. The roaring surge of affliction completely drowns out that sweet chorus.

What happens then? It is very likely that you will blame God: “I never bargained for this! God has let me down!” “I’m angry at God!” “I’m not going to trust God any more!”

Unless this line of thinking is checked, there develops an attitude of bitterness and spite: “God let me down!” “He didn’t keep me in the comfortable warmth and coziness of a spiritual incubator!” “He allowed me to be exposed to the brutal elements of this wicked world. Now I’m going to get Him back. I’m going to defy Him! That will teach Him!”

So it is that Mr. Good Time Christian sets his face against God. He furiously paddles off in his own direction, heading straight for the waterfalls and certain disaster—eternal disaster!

Here is the real tragedy: not the hard things God brings into our lives, but the bad way we respond to those things. A bad (uncomprehending, unaccepting) response is due to the false and frivolous view of the Christian life that sings,

I shall be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize
And sailed through bloody seas.

The Apostle Peter alerts us to this sobering fact: Because of our identification with Christ, we can expect to encounter opposition from the devil and the world—what Peter calls “*fiery trials*.”

When we encounter such trials, what are we to do? Peter instructs us as follows ...

I. When You Encounter “Fiery Trials,” ...Do Not Be Surprised

The Apostle Peter gently (by addressing them as “*beloved*”) reminds these Christians that we are not to be surprised when we encounter “*fiery trials*.” We must not view such experiences as though an unprecedented, unheard of

phenomenon has come upon us. The Christian life in this world is not one of perpetual and uninterrupted tranquility; on the contrary, it includes the encounter with distressing trials. The Lord Jesus informed His disciples, *“I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation. But have courage; I have conquered the world”* (Jn. 16:33.) He prayed for His disciples, and all His church, in these terms: *“I have given them your word and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking that you would take them out of the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one”* (Jn. 17:14-15.) Paul and Barnabas *“returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and [teaching] that we must enter into the kingdom of God through many tribulations”* (Acts 14:21-22.)

Note that the trials we face are *“fiery.”* That is to say, they are of such a nature and of such intensity as to put us to grief and cause intense pain and suffering at times. As Peter indicated in chapter one, such trials come in a variety of forms (1 Pet. 1:6.) One form is rejection. The Apostle Paul testifies, *“At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them”* (2 Tim. 4:16.) Another form is ridicule. When he stood before the Roman authorities on behalf of Christ, Paul was ridiculed and accused of being insane: *“At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. ‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’ he shouted. ‘Your great learning is driving you insane.’ ²⁵I am not insane, most excellent Festus,’ Paul replied. ‘What I am saying is true and reasonable”* (Acts 26:24-25.) Yet another form is physical assault, sometimes even resulting in death: [Paul confesses to the Lord that prior to his conversion,] *“when the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval”* (Acts 22:20.) Sometimes the trials take the form of direct demonic attacks. Paul testifies: *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn [the Greek word also means, “stake”] in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me”* (2 Cor. 12:7.)

Rather than being caught off guard by *“fiery trials,”* the Christian not only be prepared for them and expect them, he must also understand their purpose: they come *“for the purpose of testing you”* (vs. 12.) It is God’s divine prerogative to test the genuineness of our Christian faith and to purify that faith; and He does so by the use of various trials. He may employ **trials by “gain:**” the opportunity to make a fortune by an unscrupulous business deal; the opportunity to develop a relationship with the guy or girl of your dreams, but to do so at the sacrifice of biblical principle—when we are confronted by such trials, by means of them the Lord Jesus is asking, “Do you love Me more than these?” At other times, He may employ **trials by loss:** the loss of a job or a business; the loss of health; the loss of a loved one—when we are confronted by such trials, by means of them the Lord Jesus is asking, “Will you still love Me and trust Me?” A Christian pastor writes, “Loss or suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, shows the supremacy of God’s worth more clearly to the world than all worship and prayer” (John Piper, *Table Talk*, January, 1995.)

We must recognize that God employs trials as the means not only of purifying His people but also as the means of purging His church. Peter identifies the trial the church was presently undergoing as the beginning of God's (final) judgment (vs. 17.) One great characteristic of God's judgment is distinguishing and separating the redeemed from the unconverted and the unrepentant, as the Lord Jesus declares,

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matt. 25:31-33)

Upon making that final separation, our Lord will then assign each category of persons to their eternal destinations:

Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ... ⁴¹Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:34,41)

Peter teaches that by means of trials God purges His church; He is making a preliminary separation between those who are true disciples of Christ and those who have nothing more than a superficial relationship to Christ. By way of illustration, when a Chinese pastor, assigned to pick rocks out of a field under the Communist persecution, inquired of the Lord as to why the church was undergoing such hardship, the Lord informed him, "I am picking the rocks out of My church."

Thus it is that, by means of trials, God distinguishes between those who are genuine Christians and those who are Christian in name only. Our Lord Jesus brings to our attention this distinction in His parable of the Four Types of Seed, only one type of which proves to have a true saving relationship with Christ, as is seen by the fact that they bear spiritual fruit:

On another occasion [Jesus] began to teach by the seaside, and there gathered around him a very large crowd. Therefore he got into a boat and sat in it out on the sea, while the whole crowd remained on the shore along the water's edge. ²And he taught them many things in parables. In his teaching he said to them, ³Listen carefully. A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the pathway, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some seed fell on the rocky ground, where there was not much soil. The seed immediately sprang up, because it had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked [the young plants], and so the

seed yielded no fruit. ⁸But other seed fell into the good soil, and yielded fruit. That seed sprouted, grew, and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundredfold. ... ¹⁴The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵These are the people along the pathway where the word is sown: as soon as they have heard the word, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that has been sown in them. ¹⁶Others are like seed sown on rocky ground: when they have heard the word, they immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷but they have no root in themselves. They endure for a while; but then, when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, they immediately fall away. ¹⁸Still others are like seed sown among the thorns: these are people who have heard the word; ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the intense desires for other things come in and choke the word, and so it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰But others are like seed sown upon the good soil: they hear the word, and accept it, and bear fruit—thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. (Mk. 4:1-8,14-20)

When we encounter “*fiery trials*,” let us not be surprised. May we understand that we are being subjected to such trials because of our relationship to Christ, and as a means of testing and confirming that relationship:

... now for a little while, since it is necessary, you have been brought to grief by all kinds of trials. ⁷[This has happened] so that the genuineness of your faith—being of greater value than gold that perishes—having been tested by fire, may be verified, resulting in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 1:6-7)

II. When You Encounter “Fiery Trials,”

...Rejoice

Peter exhorts us to rejoice when we encounter such trials, because it is the evidence that we are participating in the sufferings of Christ: “*since you are participating in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice; so that at the revelation of his glory you may indeed rejoice with exultation*” (vs. 13.)

We are not called to rejoice because we are suffering; on the contrary, we are called to rejoice in the fact that our suffering is the direct consequence of our relationship to Christ. This is cause for rejoicing because it is our living, spiritual relationship with Christ that enables us to endure and that eventually carries us through the suffering to glory. By way of illustration: We may picture a thrill show water skier being pulled through a ring of fire and emerging safely into the refreshing spray of the waters of the lake. It is our relationship with Christ that both causes us to encounter the “ring of fire” and that brings us safely through it. In Romans 5:2-5 the Apostle Paul gives us this exhortation with regard to suffering, how we are to evaluate it, and how we are to respond to it:

*... we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³And not only so, but **let us even rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation produces***

steadfastness; ⁴and steadfastness, [results in divine] approval; and approval, [gives] hope; ⁵and [that] hope shall not disappoint us; because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given to us. (Rom. 5:2b-5)

In verse 14 Peter addresses a specific type of suffering, namely, being denounced for the name of Christ: *“If you are denounced for the name of Christ, you are blessed; because the Spirit of glory, indeed, the [Spirit] of God, is resting upon you.”* If we are denounced by the world (being scorned, censured, disgraced) because of our allegiance to Christ and our identification with Him, we are to be assured that all the more does the blessing (favor) of God rest upon us:

Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven, for that is how their fathers treated the prophets. (Lk. 6:22-23)

Peter explains that the reproach we encounter from the world is the indication that the Holy Spirit rests upon us. The Holy Spirit brings conviction to the world, as our Lord taught His disciples during the days of His earthly ministry: *“And when he has come, he will convict the world about sin, and about righteousness, and about judgment”* (Jn. 16:8.) In carrying out His ministry, a part of which is convicting the world of sin, the Holy Spirit operates through the life and witness of Christian people, note Ephesians 5:8-11,

Previously, you were [part of the] darkness, but now you [belong to the] light in the Lord; [therefore,] walk as children of light—⁹the fruit of the light consists of all goodness and righteousness and truth—¹⁰demonstrating what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead rebuke them. (Eph. 5:8-11)

If we encounter reproach because of our Christian life and witness, it is a dramatic testimony that the Holy Spirit is working in us and through us. Let us bear in mind that this same Holy Spirit who brings conviction to the world is also *“the Spirit of glory”*—i.e.; even as we are censured, scorned and rejected by the world, we are commended and received by the living God.

When we encounter *“fiery trials,”* let us rejoice. May we recognize that suffering reproach for Jesus’ sake is the testimony that we do have a living relationship with Him, that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us and revealing the life of Christ through us, and that as such we have favor with God and can be assured of His blessing. This all is great cause for rejoicing.

Conclusion

The Apostle Peter concludes this subject with this exhortation: *“Therefore, let those who are suffering in accordance with the will of God commit their souls in doing what is right to a faithful Creator”* (vs. 19.) In the face of opposition, hardship, tough moral choices, etc. we are to commit ourselves to God by committing ourselves to doing what is right. We are to do so with the full assurance that the LORD our God is *“a faithful Creator;”* He is faithful to reward our faithfulness to Him and He is also faithful to supply us with the grace to be faithful.