

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and
unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV)*

Prepare To Suffer

January 13th, 2019

1 Peter 4:1-19

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Peter 4:1; that's on page 1016 in your pew Bibles. We are getting back into our Faith Under Fire series. We were covering some different things over the Christmas holidays so while you find that in your Bible let me just remind of some of the things we have covered.

Peter is writing to folks in the very early days of persecution. In fact it might not even be proper to call it persecution. So far they've been slandered, they've been made fun of, they've been forced to the margins, some of them have been shut out of the market place but no one has been arrested, no one has been tortured and no one has been hung up on a cross.

But, Peter is warning them, that all of that is coming.

And it did come.

This letter was written around the year AD 60. In AD 112 – about 50 years later, the Christians in this region were formally investigated by Pliny the Younger on behalf of the Emperor Trajan. And many Christians – probably the children of the people who read this letter - were arrested, tortured and executed upon profession of faith.

Thankfully, that persecution was relatively short lived because the Emperor discovered that Christians were very useful citizens. They were good workers and they took care of widows and orphans so he decided to leave them alone and the church prospered again in that province and enjoyed an extended season of peace and growing influence.

That basic pattern was repeated many times. There would be seasons of peace, and then a change in the air followed by a brief season of intense formal and fatal persecution, which would not be sustained and which would be followed shortly by a return to peace and a further season of peace, prosperity and opportunity.

Are you getting the picture?

And are you seeing why this is such a helpful passage for us as evangelicals in North America in this particular day and age?

Peter is telling these people – who are just starting to see a gathering storm on the horizon, who are just beginning to feel the first drops of rain on their arms: don't panic, don't run into the barn, be prepared, stand your ground, do your job, nobody promised you that this would be easy. Keep working until you can't keep working or until the Master calls you home. Be faithful brothers and sisters – come RAIN OR SHINE.

That is the theme that Peter has been developing and will continue to develop over the course of chapter 4 which we will read together now. Hear the word of the Lord beginning at verse 1.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. 3 For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. 4 With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; 5 but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. 7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange

were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:1–19 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Suffering will come. Persecution will come – Peter knows that and therefore his pastoral concern here is to prepare his people to continue ministering and serving and following Jesus THROUGH THAT SUFFERING AND ON TO FINAL GLORY. This journey is going to have some ups and downs and one cannot jump off the Jesus train as it begins to descend into the Valley of the Shadow of Death and hope to experience paradise on the other side.

The one who ENDURES TO THE END will be saved!

So Peter is preparing his people for all that lies ahead and that will certainly include periodic outbreaks of formal and fatal persecution and towards that end he gives them two very important words of advice. He tells them first of all to:

1. Live like you're already dead

In verse 1 he says:

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. (1 Peter 4:1–2 ESV)

Peter says, "Look to life and work of Jesus Christ! Jesus lived for us and Jesus died for us and now Jesus calls on us to follow him. We trust in what he has done and we follow the path he has laid! And that path leads FIRST INTO DEATH and on into glory. Therefore resolve to think of yourselves as DEAD TO THE WORLD and ALIVE TO CHRIST. This kind of language is all over the New Testament. The Apostle Paul says:

those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24 ESV)

I die every day! (1 Corinthians 15:31 ESV)

Every day I wake up and I die to the flesh so that I can live for Christ – I live like I am already dead because I've died with Christ – that's what Peter is calling on them to do here. Look at verse 3:

3 For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. (1 Peter 4:3 ESV)

That is the world that you've left behind! You have to decide now to DIE to all of that. Just assume that there won't be any more of that for you. You are dead to the so called pleasures of this world. That train has left the station and you have left ALL OF THAT BEHIND! Get your head around that and resolve to pass through the valley of persecution, hatred and death on your way to the Kingdom of Eternal Glory that lies beyond. That's what it means to follow Jesus!

What did you think he meant when he said:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24 ESV)

Did you think he meant by that that you should be able to enjoy your BEST LIFE NOW AND eternal life in heaven? Is that what that means? No it means that life on this earth will be DEATH FOR YOU KNOW – but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die”. You cannot serve Jesus Christ in this life unless you resolve yourself to die.

I remember a number of years ago now in the month of November Global Television played the movie Band of Brothers for several consecutive nights on TV. Now, I'm not advocating for you to go out and buy that DVD – I understand that the DVD version has a lot more swearing than the edited version that they played on Global Television so it might be best not to – but in the version I saw, there was a scene where a young soldier was having a panic attack in his foxhole while stationed on the front lines. It was night and the young man knew that in the morning the whistle would blow and he would be called on to crawl up out of the fox hole and to charge the enemy line. His hands were shaking, his breathing was laboured and he was convinced that he would

not be able to answer the call. An older man – an officer – dropped in to offer encouragement and to stiffen his resolve. The younger man asked the officer – who was known for remarkable bravery – how it was that he was able to do the things that he did. The officer replied: “The trick son is this, you have to assume that you’re already dead. You have to decide in your mind that you are never going home. You are a dead man – you will die over here so you might as well do your job.”

That is exactly what Peter is saying – he actually uses military language. He says “Arm yourself with this way of thinking”. If you go out into battle WITHOUT THIS WEAPON – the WEAPON of a mind resolved to die – then you will fail. You will fall. You will turn back at the first sign of trouble. You have to decide right now which world you want to live in. You can live in this world and die in the next or you can die in this world and live in the next. Those are the options and you have to decide.

Peter talks about what this kind of living looks like. People who live like they are already dead are self controlled, they are sober minded, they are serving and loving other people, they are taking risks and opening up their homes, they are using their gifts and resources to build up and edify the church, they are speaking boldly as though SPEAKING THE VERY ORACLES OF GOD. They are focused on one thing and one thing only: The glory of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second thing he tells them is that they need to:

2. Focus on the final judgment

In verses 12-13 he says:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12–13 ESV)

The real issue, Peter says, is not whether you are happy NOW, the real issue is whether you will be happy on the day of Christ’s return. People who are HAPPY NOW are likely to be very

unhappy then and people who are suffering now are likely to be REJOICING THEN. So decide, each and every one of you, Peter says, whether you want to be happy now or later.

We shouldn't be surprised to hear Peter talking this way, after all he heard Jesus say much the same thing. Jesus said:

25 "Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:25–26 ESV)

Jesus said in Peter's hearing that people who are living their BEST LIVES NOW ought to be very concerned about how they will fare at Final Judgment. Why are you full now? Why are you laughing now? Why are you well thought of now? Is it not because you have lived for your belly and indulged all your lusts and compromised on all your principles? How could the world that crucified me have been so good to you? WOE UNTO YOU! For you the Day of Judgment will be a day of mourning, sadness and regret. You made the wrong choice. You underestimated the reality and the severity of final judgment.

Peter is obviously concerned to protect his people from a deficient view of God and a dangerous under estimation of final judgment. Look at what he says in verse 18:

"If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (1 Peter 4:18 ESV)

If the righteous person is SCARCELY SAVED – how will the ungodly and the sinner hope to fare? They won't! They won't stand a chance! Do not think to fast talk your way through final judgment – that is not who God is!

It amazes me how casually most Christian people today contemplate the final judgment. Christians who live like pagans but who make periodic appearances at church think to SKATE THROUGH final judgment with a wink and a nod towards the THREE TIMES HOLY GOD – THIS IS IGNORANCE and MADNESS in the extreme. The Scriptures say without holiness NO ONE will see the Lord – Hebrews 12:10 and again:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31 ESV)

Why are you afraid of persecution, Peter asks? You ought to be afraid of final judgment! God is right now:

ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Peter 4:5 ESV)

God is ready for Final Judgment - are you? Because you should be worried about that – not what Caesar may or may not do to you. Jesus said the same thing:

do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

God is Holy. You are sinful. Hell is forever. That's what you ought to be thinking about. That's the big danger that you face. Whether or not you get squeezed out of a certain profession, whether or not your in-laws think you're a crazy person – that isn't the biggest problem that you face. The biggest problem that you face is Final Judgment, so think about that.

Peter is giving wartime counsel here. He is telling these folks to choose who they are going to be afraid of and when they're going to suffer. You can suffer now or you can suffer later. But now is better because now is shorter and is followed by eternal glory.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:19 ESV)

That's his counsel.

Application:

Now, before we close I want to spend a few minutes talking about what we should do with that counsel. It might be tempting for us to file this away somewhere in our minds for future use. We could say: "Well this will be really handy if ever Christians in North America face real and formal persecution. If that happens I will pull my notes out of my enormous study bible and put them into immediate practice. Until then I shall go on living my BEST LIFE NOW."

I think that would be a mistake.

For one thing, as I mentioned already, Peter didn't give this counsel to people who were presently enduring formal persecution. He gave it to people who would not be formally persecuted for 50 years. But he tells them to start living this way NOW. He doesn't say: "Come back to this counsel in 50 years" he says you need to start thinking and living this way now.

Listen to me friends, if the Evangelical church in North America thinks that it can flip a switch and start living courageously and sacrificially at some point in the future SHOULD IT BECOME NECESSARY then they have completely misunderstood the call of the Gospel. In every season and in every hour the call of Christ is the same. Take up your cross and follow me.

So what would it look like for us to LIVE in light of the counsel we have received from 1 Peter 4? Let me suggest to you that it would involve at least the following three things. Applying this counsel first of all would require:

1. A decision to wean ourselves off of the inebriating pleasures of the world

Over the course of this letter Peter several times warns these people of the need to be SOBER MINDED.

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:13 ESV)

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. (1 Peter 4:7 ESV)

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 ESV)

These are dangerous times, Peter says and you need to have your wits about you. The Greek word used in these passages – *nepho* – means literally "to abstain from intoxicants". Peter is warning these folks that the devil wants to numb their minds and to dull their wits so that they do not respond soberly and appropriately to the realities that they face.

At the very least – at the very least – I think this means that Christians ought to have absolutely nothing to do with "legal marijuana". The last thing we need to do in this turbulent and uncertain hour is surrender our wits and sobriety. So let's have nothing to do with that.

And let's be very careful how much of the toxin and pollution of the culture we are sucking up into our brains through television and social media. The things we put into our mind AFFECT how we view the world – they influence our perception of right and wrong and that's important because Jesus said:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4 ESV)

Jesus said that one of the marks of a truly saved person is that he or she feels the right way about sin. Boy, that verse almost seems to suggest that you can laugh your way out of the Kingdom of God.

Do you remember that strange vision in Ezekiel? In Ezekiel the prophet has a vision about the coming judgment. He sees an angel who's sent out with a paintbrush and told to put a mark upon the foreheads of those who will be spared the judgment that is to come. Do you remember who received the mark? God told the angel:

“Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” (Ezekiel 9:4 ESV)

The people who were saved were the only people left in the city who still felt the right way about sin. They had not been seduced or intoxicated to the casual viewpoint of the world.

So let me ask you: How is your sin perception? What are you laughing at these days? What makes you weep? Are you sober? Or do you regularly blow over because of the sheer volume of sin and pollutant that you absorb through your contact with the culture?

Christians cannot withdraw from the world but they need to engage wisely and cautiously if they want to remain sober minded.

Secondly, Christians will need to make:

2. A decision to endure the social outrage of the culture

It is interesting to note the immediate cause of the persecution that Peter predicts as inevitable in chapter 4. Look at verse 4:

With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you (1 Peter 4:4 ESV)

People are going to get angry, Peter predicts, when you do not go along with their plunge into moral and sexual debauchery. Sound familiar? What is it that has so stirred the wrath of our culture against Christianity? Our refusal to go along with the sexual revolution. That simply will not be tolerated. They will not agree to disagree on this one and so Christians are going to have to decide whether they will bow the knee to culture or remain faithful to Jesus Christ.

For a long time Christians were relatively well thought of within our culture. Listen to me friends: Those days are over. The word “Christian” now to anyone under the age of 50 means roughly “homophobic”. It means “transphobic”. It means “bigot”. And you can’t avoid what’s going on over here by trying to do flashy and relevant things over here. That might have worked back when the culture was less focused in their outrage, but it won’t work now.

They will press you and they will force you to declare.

So we need to let go of this idea that we can distract and disguise our way back into the centre of the culture. It’s not going to happen. If we believe what the Bible says about God, about human beings and about sexuality – then we are going to be on the outside. Therefore all of our current models have to be adjusted. We need to learn how to speak again into the culture from the margins. It’s a new day brothers and sisters – but the good news we have been here before – in fact all of our best strategies were designed with this particular location in mind. We were never meant to be at the centre – we were meant to be salt and light.

And then lastly, if we are to apply Peter’s counsel in our day it will require:

3. A decision to invest in Christian community

In verse 8 Peter tells them to keep loving each other, in verse 9 he tells them to welcome fellow Christians into their homes, he goes on to tell them to use their gifts to serve one another and to

speak to one another the very oracles of God.

In anticipation of formal persecution he tells them to invest in church.

You know if I were Satan and I were planning something big against the North American church I think I would begin by getting a bunch of people to believe the lie that you can follow Jesus by yourself. Like the lion that he is he wants to separate people from the safety of the herd. And so knowing that, Peter tells these Christians to stick together and to invest heavily in their corporate life and ministry.

Build up your church, Peter says, in advance of persecution.

Don't be the fool who thinks he can do it on his own. You need each other – you need the church - and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Even still, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.

Let's pray together.