

Proving Grounds

1 Peter 4:12-19

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We're getting closer to the end of 1 Peter. One of the things we find as we get to the end of 1 Peter, is he begins to go back to the central elements of his letter. In fact there are very few books in the New Testament, none that I'm aware of actually, that speak of the gospel in the context of suffering the way that Peter does in this letter. And so he returns to familiar themes that he gave to us in the early chapters of the book. If you remember just for a moment, he says this in chapter one... he says to them: "In this you greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief and all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed." He now returns to this theme, and we along with him, as we look at God's Word in looking—in hearing Peter speak to us in relationship to this very important scriptural theme, though also one that provides a lot of questions. And that is the proving ground of suffering. Return to God's Word this morning 1 Peter chapter 4:12-19. Hear now God's Holy Word.

"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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 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?"

"And if the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." [1 Peter 4:12-19, ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ as we have already confessed our hope that He is the one who has suffered in our place. And yet in this life we also, knowing Him, recognize that suffering is a part of this life. So Lord help us by way of your servant, Peter, to learn and to grasp, just a little bit, of what You're doing in the midst of trial and suffering. But as you do so, we pray that you would place our hope squarely on the one who is victorious over sin and death, who is with us and not far off in the midst of our trials. Help us we pray, in the name of Christ. Amen.

We live as residents of the state of Maryland, near the oldest and active proving ground in the United States. Aberdeen proving ground was established just six months after the end of World War I. It replaced Sandy Hook proving ground in southern New Jersey. It replaced Sandy Hook because they needed a larger place to task and to prove the worthiness of both weapons and weapon systems in the use of war for the protection of our homeland, as well as in active warfront around the globe. But one of the things that we learn about studying just a little bit of military history in the United States, we recognize the importance and learn of the importance of these proving grounds around the United States. And we rarely think of being thankful for these proving grounds. Largely because it's a mystery of what's

being tested there. But one of the reasons we ought to be thankful for them is because weapons that are used for the protection of the United States, and our allies here and around the world, have come through a large amount of testing. A great amount of hardship and of trial, fire, live weaponry being used around them, their computer systems being tested under the harshest of conditions, tested against those who would seek to infiltrate their systems to debilitate them; they've been tested over and over and over again. Not only to protect those who use them, but to protect those who require their protection—namely us. So we scarcely understand the value of these proving grounds because, well, unless—ok so I know this audience is largely made up of people who are responsible for a lot of those things, but that's beside the point. The issue is, even though we don't know, and can't know what goes on there, it is precisely the suffering and the fiery trial, which Peter points to, is a way which we can also connect to what happens there. Our suffering and our trials are proving grounds for our faith.

Peter wants us to see that a God who loves us will allow us to go through trial and suffering so that our faith, our character, is refined, purified, strengthened, and prepared. Because without it, we don't know how strong our faith is. Sadly, we have to recognize that in this life, it would be great to say, 'Man, wouldn't it be nice if we could just learn how to be really good people with integrity, and strength, and strong character in the good times? Without the need for suffering and trial?' The sad reality is that it requires testing, but it is this: if the United States government values our safety and goes to the end that it can, spending billions of dollars each year, to design, prepare, and test, and test, and test, weapon systems to protect us, as a demonstration of their commitment to protect us... how much more does not the love of God walk with us in the midst of our suffering to prepare us for his return? This is precisely what Peter wants us to hear, so let's look at it together: the reasons, the refinery, and the responses of this proving ground of suffering. Reasons, refinery, responses.

The reasons—now here I want to be specific to the text, and that is... what are the reasons for the suffering in view for Peter in chapter four? We have to say that it is quite clear that there are two ways in which he looks at suffering here. First, specifically, the suffering of Christians for *being* Christians. Secondly, suffering from sinful decisions and actions. Now having said that, it isn't to say that nothing that Peter says here isn't also applicable to all forms of suffering. That is most certainly true. But what he has in focus here is a specific kind. And here he says to them: "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." He is writing to a group of people who have been socially ostracized, who have been belittled, who have been insulted, who have suffered at the hands of persecutors for their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. As those who once lived according to the world's philosophies and accepted practices of their fellow family members, of their friends, this was in the surrounding regions of what is modern day Turkey, and so it was infected with all kinds of idolatry in the Roman Empire.

And so as he said earlier in the letter they think it strange that you do not plunge into their very activities. It's because they used to do those things and now they don't. And their reason for not doing so, is not because they didn't formally enjoy them, it's because they now have a different Lord—a different King other than their own desires and their own hearts. And so now as those who've submitted themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, they're suffering for his name. But then he says, "this should not surprise you"—and the reason it should not surprise them is because if Christ suffered because of *who* he was, so is the promise of scripture, so it will be for those who are of the name of Christ, who believe in him and trust him. The reason for their suffering is not because they're bad people or because they have bad luck or they lived in an empire or in a country that is particularly egregious, it is because that when we live our lives and profess faith in Jesus Christ and allow that to hold sway in our decision making, in our relationships, in our work, than it will bring a tension to the name that is above all names. And when that happens, people will stop inviting you to their parties, they will ridicule you, they will call you names, they will belittle you, they will call you an idiot. And it will feel very, very alone. But he says "don't be surprised," because it happened to the Savior. And he said the same will happen to you.

But the other kind of suffering that speaks to is suffering because of sinful decisions. Because, the same reminder here in verse twelve is also a reminder to those who don't believe. He says we could also interpret it when he says "beloved do not be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes upon *you*." Well he speaks of this fiery trial, verse sixteen, "yet if anyone of you suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify—" rather, verse fifteen, sorry, verse fifteen: "But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler." So here is a sort of a way of a life lesson. He's saying this is what I have in view in regard to suffering. There are those who suffer because of the name of Christ. They allow it to form their lives and shape them. But also do not surprised people, that if you steal you're going to get caught. That if you gossip or you meddle in other people's business, you're going to get doors slammed in your face, then you're going to be ostracized. Don't be surprised, people.

And as well, if you are a murderer and you get put in jail, you lose your right to vote, you lose your freedom. Don't be surprised. But he says, "but let that not be true to you." He's holding out to us a life lesson. We are free with our wills to choose our decisions, all day long. We can choose the right path, we can choose to follow Christ or we can choose to reject Him on our own way. We are free to make that choice, but we're not free to choose our consequences. The consequences of being a murderer or a thief or a meddler, a gossip... those consequences will come upon you like a wave. But his appeal is, let that not be true of you. Do you want a suffering that leads to consequences that is not freedom, but enslavement? Or do you want to be united to the one who has been victorious over sin and death? Though they can persecute you, though they can make fun of you and ostracize you from society—they may even put you in jail—but what they can't do is they cannot enslave your soul. And it will not be because of your guilty or evil decisions, rather, it will be because of the name that is above all names who suffered for you. We too, in His name, will suffer. These are the different reasons—not all the reasons for suffering—but these are two that he has in view.

The nuts and bolts of the text is really about the second point, and that is: the refinery. It's not the "what", but a little bit of the "why" of this kind of suffering. Now here he's specifically speaking to those who profess the name of Christ. And this refinery we see here, when 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." This idea of fire and testing are two different words. This idea of testing is the word that, literally translated, is the something that pierces you, something that pokes at you, something that tests you. And one of the ways you can learn the integrity of something, is well, how do you test the value of me? You can't just look at the outside of me, sometimes you have to cut it open to see. And so piercing, is that same idea that suffering can become something that pokes you and opens you up. And when it does it begins to reveal what's on the inside in a way that good times and celebrating doesn't. And so it begins to prove the value, prove the integrity of something. That's what it tests. It's testing not what you say you believe, but how you actually live. Because in the midst of suffering, what is inevitable is what's in the inside will come out. Because when we're honest, go to a hospital, and you begin to see what our true selves are often like.

In 1958, my mother was diagnosed with something that was little known at the time and was often misdiagnosed, but she was not misdiagnosed, she was diagnosed with something called fibromyalgia. And some of you know of that diagnosis. I can tell you that for nearly 90% of my life, I never knew that. But over the last five years my mother has been told by a doctor, he says everything that you have is on a scale from one to ten, is about a nine. The bad news is that everything you have—I mean the bad news is—let me get this right, what did he say to her... I couldn't believe a doctor said this. He said you have a lot of things that will really hurt you, but none of them will kill you. But there will be times that you wish you were dead. And when she shared that with me over the phone a few years back, I began to see a different side to my mother. She's 4'7" but has a capacity and a level for pain that I could not fathom. I stub my toe—my wife will tell you—I stub my toe and I'm like ouching through the house. And I've begun to see over these last few weeks as my mother has had her hip replacement... is she a gracious

person? Is she a thankful person? My mother and I have had our disagreements, but the integrity of her character is something that I haven't seen in quite this way. She's been tested. And she's being tested.

There's something else that happens here to the Christian, it's not that our faith is pierced and opened up to see its integrity or its value. There's this other word which is literally translated: purity. It's this idea that it's wonderful if we say what we believe, but the purity, the value, of what we believe is really tested when we are persecuted for the name of Christ. When we're belittled for our belief in faith. And it works like a refiner's fire. He tells us that, indeed, when we are insulted for the name of Christ we are blessed. That if we suffer for being a Christian, instead of being ashamed, we get to glorify His name. Because in the midst of suffering, like a refinery, like fire to gold, it removes the impurities out of the gold and gives to us its purity, its value.

The same is the case with suffering. That when we suffer for the name of Christ, what it begins to reveal is: is Christ really my trust, or something else? And it begins to reveal not what we say believe but how we really live. How do we live, Christian, if we call upon His name? This text forces me to the question. And it forced me to go back to one of the best books, if ever written, on the nature of suffering. A doctor Timothy Keller a couple of years ago, wrote a book which I commend to everyone: "Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering." It is a wonderful book, but I want to quote him because he says it far better than I. He says:

"Peter likens the Christian with saving faith in Jesus Christ to gold filled with impurities. Mixed in with our faith in God are all sorts of competing commitments to comfort, power, pride, pleasure, and self. Our faith is largely abstract and intellectual and not very heartfelt. We may believe cognitively that we are sinners saved by God's grace, but our hearts actually function on the premise that we are doing well because we are more decent or open-minded or hardworking or loving or sophisticated than others. We have many blemishes in our character. We are too fragile under criticism or too harsh in giving it. We are bad listeners, or ungenerous to people we think foolish, or too impulsive, or too timid and cowardly, or too controlling, or unreliable. But we are largely blind to these things, even though they darken our own lives and harm other people. Then suffering comes along. Timidity and cowardice, selfishness and self-pity, tendencies toward bitterness and dishonesty—all of these "impurities" of soul are revealed and drawn out by trials and suffering just as a furnace draws the impurities out of unrefined metal ore. Finally we can see who we really are. Like fire working on gold, suffering can destroy some things within us and can purify and strengthen other things. Or it won't."

And see there's the dividing line for Peter. For those who are in Christ, the suffering will prove valuable cause it will be the proving ground of the integrity of our character and our faith. It will reveal the true foundation upon which we live. It will reveal the impurities and blemishes in our character that maybe others see but are afraid to tell us and are blind to. But the suffering brings it out. Or it won't, and we won't see it. Perhaps suffering will lead us to be even harsher people, less generous, more angry, more self-focused. What will the answer be?

Peter gives to us a list of responses. I'll just quickly recount them. He says first rejoice, be glad, and praise. Rejoice, be glad, and praise. He's saying that for the Christian that when you face suffering like this, the responses that come are ones that seem more apt for the good times. But he actually says for the Christian for suffers according to God's Will, when He allows suffering for the name of Christ and our faith to come on us, that we can be a people who begin to thank God for it. To rejoice that we are sharing in the sufferings of Christ. But also to be glad, because as we go through it, our faith is strengthened. Our characters are being made more holy, because we are reflecting the Lord Jesus as the suffering begins to remove our false foundations of pride, or power, or success, and takes us back to what our foundation ought to be, as those who profess faith. And that is Jesus Christ. He's calling us to these responses.

But if you read them, how is that possible? How can suffering actually bring about more integrity, more spiritual health, more holiness? I tell you, it is absolutely impossible for that to be the case. If we—or if we do not know the Lord Jesus Christ. Because the truth is this: the Lord loves you so much that His son died for you. Not to make you a happy, smiling, good people... He died for us to make us Holy. And the inescapable reality of this life is that the process of being made holy is suffering for the name of Christ. Because when we're honest, we want to trust in our own power, and pride, and success. But its only in the midst of the crucible of suffering do we begin to see how much we're just relying on our own flesh. And we have Jesus along as an accessory to an already well-lived life.

But Peter and the Lord Jesus desire something differing for us. Jesus is not meant to be an accessory: He is life itself. And Jesus has walked in this life, He's walked in our flesh. And we can say, and only those who profess faith in Christ can say, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I no evil. I will fear no one. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of suffering, I will fear no evil. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death and my sins and my impurities are brought to the forefront, I will not fear because perfect love casts out all fear. Because in that valley of the shadow of death we have a savior who's not just with us, we have the Shepherd who went before us. And if Jesus is with us and has communed with us in His flesh and has communed with us in His crucified body and was raised to life on the third day and communes with us by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit and He is present here, then I can say to you as a Christian, Jesus is with you. And no suffering will overcome you. It will hurt. It may even take from you the life that you are now experiencing, because death is still part of this life, but it will not separate the love of God from you.

And I say this to you in the name of Christ, if you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you are suffering, I must tell you that coming to Christ will not mean the removal of suffering. I don't want you to have that image of Christianity. You may even suffer more as a result of being a Christian. But this I do know. That there is a love so pure, so powerful, so present, that it will never leave you nor forsake you in the midst of your suffering, and that Jesus has died for you. And I invite you this morning, to know him, and to know the freedom that comes with His salvation. And as a promise to those of you who profess Christ, and as a promise to those of you who do not know Him but may be considering the gospel, I want to read to you a passage that I've read many times in this congregation. But I want to read it again because it is so dear to my own faith and walk. It is Romans chapter eight.

He says this "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen. Let's pray.

Father we confess that the proving grounds of suffering are difficult and we don't want them. And yet we recognize that we suffer according to Your will, for the name of Christ. We also have a whole host of ways in which we suffer, oh Lord, which are still in view to us this morning. Sufferings in this life because of sin and brokenness. And that things are not the way they ought to be, sickness and death. But also sin that brings about suffering because of evil-doing. Lord we bring all of this to You. We bring it before You and we bring our ragtag souls and hearts to You and we ask that You would help us to taste the love that will not let us go. And that You would be able to transform suffering which is bitter and sour to suffering where we can say blessed be the name of the Lord. That we will be made holy and pure, for the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ. In His mighty name we pray, amen.