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The Valley of Suffering, 4

1 Peter 4:12-19

If you have ever stood by the bedside of a dying brother or sister in the Lord, you know it is quite the privilege. I'm NOT talking about a nominal Christian, BUT one who genuinely and passionately loved the Lord in their life. For you see, they do NOT die like most men.

In ministry, I've been in nursing homes and watched many a non-Christian die. Oft times there is an anger, coldness, and depression about them. I recall the last words that I heard of one elderly man, "*You have heard of the golden years? They suck!*" Contrast that with one dying saint who for them cancer meant being with the Lord! Or another who shared the glories

of Christ with everyone who entered their room! This no doubt is why Balaam so long ago said with envy, "...let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!" (Numbers 23:10b)

What explains this? It is NOT because the genuine Christian is of a better cloth than others. It's just the opposite. The genuine believer knows they are incredibly wretched sinners! RATHER, it involves two things. First, the fact that Christ is real and really does tend to His children as they face death! Think of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego (Daniel 3) or Stephen (Acts 7)! While we cannot derive from these examples the promise that on our death bed we will behold the Lord as did they, nevertheless these passages reflect the truth of God's word that in our dying, Jesus is present whether we see Him or not. God told His suffering people:

Isaiah 43:1b-2a, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters [which would include death], I WILL BE WITH YOU; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you..."

The other reason devout Christians die differently is because they understand truth! How is it that the three young men of the book of Daniel could so boldly face their death? Listen to that which impelled them.

Daniel 3:16-17, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.'"

Peter wrote to give his persecuted brethren the tools needed for them to face death NOT in fear or panic, BUT with the calm boldness that comes from knowing truth!¹ Recall, Peter began this epistle sometime during the Neronian Persecution of 64 AD! The first four chapters reference the fact that the safety and lives of God's people at this time were in question. Yet, it isn't clear how severe the threat was.

But all that changes with the final section of this epistle: 1 Peter 4:12-5:14.

1 Peter 4:12a, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing..."

If there was any question as to where God's people were at the writing of this epistle, this verse clears it up. They were in the crucible!! Accordingly, Peter penned this passage to enable his brothers and sisters to face death, when it came, with confidence, boldness, and grace!

We've look at the first four words of exhortation that Peter gave here. Consider with me the fifth that suffering for the believer is a foretaste of the last judgment.

1 Peter 4:17a, "For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God²..."

At first blush, this sounds intimidating — it always has for me! *“The time has come for God to get even with His people on account of their sin! It’s payback time!”* Yet that is a complete misreading of this text³ and does violence to what we already have seen (cf. v. 12a)! While “judgment” and punishment often go hand in hand in this world, the two are NOT the same (yet we read this text as if they were!). Consider these things:

- In the Olympics when *judgment begins*, races are run, and medals are handed out.
- In Academics, *judgments* are written/oral tests which gauge what you do or do not know so that you can address the deficiency.
- In Sports, judgments are the games that are played which reveal weaknesses which then can be addressed in practice the next week.

In the context of the body of Christ, “judgment” has this connotation and much more. We know that the entire world — the church included- is moving toward the last judgment. This will involve two very important elements:

- An assessment of one’s standing (cf. Matthew 25:19-30).
- A resulting fire — either of purification or punishment (cf. Malachi 3:1-5; Revelation 20:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

As it relates to the Christian, let’s talk about this, for the last judgment need not frighten us! Sober us? Yes! But NOT frighten us, for if you are in Christ, the first element of the last judgment has already been judicially rendered- adjudicated- as it relates to you! Did you know that?

This is what is behind the doctrine of justification. It is a forensic — judicial- declaration of one’s innocence as it relates to the Law. When you were saved, God made a judicial declaration that you are “not guilty”! And this, you must see, is the language of the last judgment. That is why Paul could assure his Roman brethren:

Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Not today, tomorrow, or when we stand before God on the Last Day! Because of Christ’s cross-work, we already know the verdict that will be rendered at this time: “Not guilty!”

Yet, what about the second element of the Last Judgment- the fire of purification or punishment? Well, if you are in Christ (and so declared “not guilty”), then the resulting fire could NOT be a fire of punishment; it could ONLY be a fire of purification. Speaking of the Lord at the last judgment and God’s people we read this in Malachi:

Malachi 3:2b-3, “...for He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap [that means the fire referenced here is the fire of cleansing]. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.”

The last judgment for God's people, secondly, will be about our cleansing, the final removing from our bodies our fallen humanness such that we will be perfect NOT only in position BUT also in practice.

1 John 3:2a, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him..."

With that, let me ask you an important question: Is it conceivable that God could begin the second element of the last judgment *BEFORE THE TIME*, as in today in the life of a believer? We know that the "powers of the age to come" accompanied the first advent of our Lord (Hebrew 6:5). Is it possible that the purifying fires of the Last Judgment could also be experienced by God's people in this age? Peter's point here is NOT only that it is possible, BUT that in fact is the case! Think about it.

- If you are a Christian then God has ALREADY, before the time, brought to pass the first element of the Last Judgment in your life when He "justified" you — declared you to be "not guilty"!
- So, is it possible that God could begin the second facet of the last judgment — the purifying process — in the life of His children in this age? If you say, "Yes!" — which I hope you do for that is the right answer — then you now can understand what Peter is teaching here.⁴

1 Peter 4:17a, "For *it is* time for judgment [NOT 'punishment' which again is how you and I tend to read this text which trips us up.⁵ The 'judgment' here is the judgment of tempering!] to begin with the household of God..."

The point Peter is making is that the second part of the last judgment can occur in part at times in the life of God's people prior to their death. When this occurs, we understand that, with the trial or difficulty, God is NOT punishing the believer, BUT refining them *before the time!* Recall the words of the Apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 11:32, "But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world."

God's judgments when it comes to His children are never a punishment, but a growing in grace! Peter Davids explains it this way:

Yet even if suffering has a good purpose, a further explanation of why it is happening is necessary. The reason, according to our author, is quite simple, 'it is the time to begin the judgment.' God's judgment has already been cited several times in 1 Peter (1:17; 2:23; 4:5–6) and *'the judgment'* can only indicate the final judgment (Acts 24:25; Romans 2:2–3; Hebrew 6:2; 2 Peter 2:3; Jude 4; Revelation 17:1; 18:20), a judgment that the OT indicated would begin with God's people and in God's own temple... Thus our author sees the final

judgment as beginning now in the church, God's house or temple (cf. 2:5), a judgment that will purify it. (Davids, 1990, p. 171)⁶

This is what was going on at this time with the churches of Rome!⁷ Judgment had begun with "the household of God" — a judgment whose purpose was NOT to condemn, BUT to purify!

And this, you must see, is what at times is going in your life — which means, unless you are under formal church discipline, trial and difficulty are NEVER there to punish you, BUT to purify you for your wedding day!

Suffering for the believer is "Insignificant" in comparison to what awaits the non-believer, vv. 17b-18.

1 Peter 4:17b-18, "For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?"⁸

There is a contrast here that you don't want to miss, especially when you feel unloved on account of the lot before you. At the writing of this epistle, again God's people were suffering *BEFORE THE TIME* under a foretaste of the tempering grace of God! AND THIS WE KNOW IS UNPLEASANT. Hebrews was written at the same time as 1 Peter and so likewise in light of the Neronian persecution we read this:

Hebrew 12:11, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful..."

In the case of those receiving the epistle of 1 Peter, the word "sorrowful" translated to these things:

- Intimidation by a hostile world.
- Threats, violence, forfeiture of property.
- Torture.
- And in many cases, violent, cruel death!

One can imagine, in spite of the great teaching of Peter here, the believers throughout the Roman Empire at this time might have felt picked on by God!⁹ *Why is He allowing this? This is so bad!*

Truly, there is nothing pleasant about the crucible by which, as we just saw, the Lord in this life has and will refine us!¹⁰ Yet lest you think that your suffering is an indicator of the displeasure of God, Peter reminds us of what it means to be a recipient of the displeasure of God!

At the writing of this epistle (up and through even today), the non-Christian — living or dead — had not begun to experience the misery that awaits them on account of their sin! You must see

that what we might call a “tragedy” or “crises” is a field day in comparison to what those under God’s wrath someday will experience — and that is Peter’s point.

1 Peter 4:17b-18, “For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? [They know the answer... as recipients of Paul’s epistles and the gospels, they knew the fate of those who die without Christ] And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?”

Truly, as unpleasant as it is to be in the refiner’s fire as a Christian, it is NOTHING in comparison to sitting under the eternal wrath of an Omnipotent God! Let me give you a rather shallow look at the biblical teaching on Hell. The Bible describes hell as a place:

- Of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30).
- Of outer darkness (Matthew 22:13).
- Of unending torment (Luke 16:23).
- Of sorrows (2 Samuel 22:6).
- Of everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9).
- Of no rest (Revelation 14:11).
- Of hopeless, unsatisfied desires (Luke 16:24).
- Where men are tormented with fire and brimstone for eternity (Revelation 21:8).
- Where “their worm does not die [we are talking here about individual, personalized torment on account of sin], and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44).

Secondly, we read of the biblical witness of hell:

- Daniel referred to hell as a place of shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2).
- Paul called it a place of endless destruction and punishment (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).
- Jude called it a place of eternal fire and darkness (Jude 7).
- The Apostle John described hell as a place where sinners suffer everlasting torment, with no rest day or night (Revelation 14:9-11).

Thirdly, Jesus, whenever He described hell, was never flippant or dismissive.¹¹ He used vivid, terrifying terms to describe the final destination of sinners- like these:

- “Darkness” (Matthew 22:13) which speaks of loneliness, insecurity, the sense of being lost and disoriented.
- “Fire” (Matthew 13:42, 50; Mark 9:48-49) which speaks of the excruciating pain of burning.
- “Lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14-15) which carries the idea of drowning, suffocating, and so the taking in of the burning sulfur internally.

And yet there is more. For consider the *INTERNAL* torment of hell. While it’s true that hell is

a place of unimaginable pain and suffering, we often overlook the mental/spiritual agony of being *completely forsaken* — abandoned for all eternity. Think of it: the most chilling cry that our Lord every uttered did NOT stem from any physical torture or pain, BUT from being forsaken by the Father, “My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46) — such haunting words! Dr. MacArthur, explaining the significance of this, put it this way:

This is a reminder to all sinners that while hell is the full fury of God’s personal punishment presence, He will never be there to comfort. He will never be there to show sympathy. He will never bring relief. (MacArthur, 2008-10-19)¹²

Now is all of this horrible news? Of course, it is! Does this depress you? If it didn’t, there would be something dreadfully wrong with you. J.I. Packer wrote:

New Testament teaching about hell is meant to appall us and strike us dumb with horror, assuring us that, as heaven will be better than we could dream, so hell will be worse than we can conceive. (Packer, 2001, p. 262)¹³

When we consider the pain and misery of trial, difficulty, persecution, torture, and even martyrdom (all of which in our ignorance we might confuse with an angry God), none of it can compare with the eternal pain, suffering, torment, and misery that await the non-Christian! It truly is “...a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of a living God” (Hebrew 10:31)!!

Think of it! If the Lord allowed your pinky toe to be dipped into a cauldron containing the wrath of God just for a millisecond, you would forever and always consider earthly trial and difficulty to be “momentary and light” (2 Corinthians 4:17) and even gentle by comparison!

And this is Peter’s point! Looking at eternity and considering the lot of ones *truly* under the wrath of God, we should never confuse the difficulties we face in this life as the bitter expressions of an angry God! Peter’s message here simply is: “*For any who might be tempted to look at their difficult lot in Christ and then consider that perhaps God was displeased with them, THIS is what the displeasure of God looks like!*”

And that brings us lastly to the secret to suffering well.

1 Peter 4:19, “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”

You may recall: this verse is a summary of the three-fold message of this epistle:

1. Suffering,
2. the Sovereign Will of a Good God
3. Trust.¹⁴

As Peter has dealt with the first two quite thoroughly just in the passage before us, I want to

close our study with a couple of words on “trust” or “entrust” (παρατίθημι [*paratithēmi*]).

Originally, the word came from the banking industry of the ancient world and so referred to a “deposit” which carried the legal sense of leaving an object in another’s keeping. This nuance would accompany this word as it morphed and developed from Classical Greek into Koine Greek. It is the very word Christ used when He cried, “Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

So, how is it that God’s people would be able to suffer well under the horrors of the Neronian Persecution? Simply, by depositing their “souls” into the care and keeping of “a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” Peter’s word choice here is purposed.

The word for “faithful” means “able to be trusted.” In other words, if you by faith entrust/deposit your soul to God, He will by no means let you down! How can we know this? Because He is faithful! And yet, there is more. He is a “faithful Creator”! How much work was it for God to create NOT just the globe on which we presently live, NOR the galaxy in which it moves, BUT the entire universe? He simply spoke a word and everything in creation came to be! That is how powerful God is!



It is for this reason that if you “entrust your soul to God” He will NOT lose it! Think of it: the very God who created the sun most certainly can protect and preserve your soul! And yet, He’ll do far more than just keep, protect, and preserve your soul! Notice that taking your soul into His keeping, God will always “do what is right” with it! The language here is NOT definite as to the object of “doing what is right.” Some take this in reference to the believer (as in the ESV). Others in reference to God. I am emphasizing the latter here. However, as the text is indefinite, it would include both ideas!

If a bank robber was able to get through the solid granite wall perimeter and past the squadrons of machinegun wielding guards and military personal, the thief would then have to contend with a 22-ton vault door. That 22-ton blast door is held shut by a lock which requires a ten-person team to unlock. That no doubt is why Fort Knox has never had a published robbery attempt?

With this notice: there is one word behind this expression — ἀγαθοποιῖα (*agathopoiia*). This word comes from (1) ποιέω (*poieō*) which means “to make or to do” and (2) ἀγαθός (*agathos*) denoting that which is morally blameless, upright, and so good. As a compound, the word speaks of bringing about that which is without flaw, upright, perfect, and so blameless. That is what God will do with your soul if you deposit it with Him. Thomas R. Schreiner wrote of this:

The reference to God’s will here as in 3:17 indicates that all suffering passes through his hands (cf. 3:17), that nothing strikes a believer apart from God’s loving and sovereign control. (Schreiner, 2003, p. 229)

So, how is it that the men and women of Peter's generation could thrive In the Valley of Suffering? They must NOT hold on to their souls/their life with greedy fingers. RATHER, they must deposit their soul into the care of an omnipotent and good God who by all means will protect and preserve it regardless of the path it might be carried through!

Family of God, after everything we have learned from this text, will you do that this day?¹⁵ Paul did. At the end of his life, this was his testimony speaking of the sovereign care of God by which the Lord brought Paul through so much suffering in his life,

2 Timothy 1:12, "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."

Paul did exactly what Peter exhorted here. He entrusted His life to God! And did God let him down? Absolutely not! In Glory, we can look forward to seeing the amazing results when we gaze upon this brother! Such was the testimony of King David so many years before:¹⁶

Psalm 25:8-10a, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. [What is that 'way'? Based on this Psalm as a whole, it was entrusting their soul to Him-for...] He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way. [And now David's editorial comment from his own personal experience...] All the paths of the Lord [even the valley of the shadow of death] are lovingkindness and truth..."

Which is why we need never "fear evil"!

So how is it that Balaam envied the death of the child of God? It was NOT because their death was so easy. RATHER, it was because of the internal hope and confidence that comes from knowing the character of our good God, His eternal plan, and how that plan is worked out in our lives.

Christian, with everything we have seen in this passage, we must once for all remove from our thinking any notion that the trials and difficulties of this life are there as a punishment from God. This thought NOT ONLY will rob you of your joy (which is your strength), BUT it will render you impotent in your ability to share "of the hope that is within you" (1 Peter 3:15) when the worldling inquires as to the reason for your confidence in the fire!

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End Note(s)

- ¹ Think of the many accounts in Foxes Book of Martyrs!
- ² Dennis Johnson has argued persuasively that this phrase in the LXX never refers to the “household” of God’s people, but always to the temple, the “house of God” in terms of the building in which God dwells. Thus, it is likely that it should be translated “house of God” here as well. (cf. (Johnson, 1986, pp. 291-292))
- ³ Thomas R. Schreiner wrote of this text, “The background of Malachi 3 is closer conceptually to Peter’s message in this respect, for the Lord will come to his temple and refine and purify his people, and then the offerings of his people will be acceptable (Mal 3:1–4). That the judgment in Peter does not involve destruction is clear from the parallel statement in v. 18, where the godly are ‘saved.’ We have already seen in 1:6–7 that the trials and difficulties of the righteous are designed to purify and refine believers so that they will receive their final reward (cf. also 4:12). Even though God’s household is the temple in the Old Testament, we see here that Peter, in concert with other New Testament writers (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 3:6), now conceives of the church, God’s people, as his temple.” (Schreiner, 2003, pp. 226-227)
- ⁴ There is little doubt that the backdrop of Peter’s teacher here is Ezekiel 9 and Malachi 3. The language of Peter here comes from both of these texts. For specifics, cf. Wayne Grudem’s commentary on 1 Peter, TNTC, p. 189-190.
- ⁵ The “word for judgment (*krima*) does not necessarily mean ‘condemnation’ (which would be *katakrima*) but is a broader term which can refer to a judgment which results in good and bad evaluations, a judgment which may issue in approval or discipline as well as condemnation.” (Grudem, 2009, p. 188)
- ⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner said the same, “The judgment here is the final judgment (cf. 1:17; 2:23; 4:5), but this judgment begins even now, in the present evil age.” (Schreiner, 2003, pp. 227-228)
- ⁷ Once again, we note Peter’s use of the Old Testament. The expression “household of God” is a term used in the OT for the Temple. This combined with his use of “fiery ordeal” or “refining fire” (v. 12)- which does not destroy but purifies God’s people- calls to mind the word of God in Malachi. Malachi 3 predicts that the Lord himself ‘will suddenly come to his temple’ as ‘the messenger of the covenant’ who ‘is like a refiner’s fire’ (3:1–2; ‘fire’ is *pur* in the LXX, not the same word but a related word to *pyrōsis*, ‘refining fire’, in 1 Peter 4:12). Malachi adds, ‘He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord’ (Malachi 3:3). ‘Then I will draw near to you for judgment ...’ (on unbelievers: Malachi 3:5).
- The application of this passage to Peter’s readers should be clear: if the Lord is already in the midst of his new temple (i.e. his people), they should ‘not be surprised at the refining fire which comes among you (Greek *en humin*, ‘in the midst of you’) to prove you ... the Spirit of glory and of God is resting upon you’ (vv. 12, 14). He is the ‘messenger of the covenant in whom you delight’ (Malachi 3:1), so they can ‘rejoice’ (v. 13) in his presence. But with him also comes a refining fire, and they must purify themselves of all iniquities in order to avoid the pain of his disciplining judgment, even while they continue trusting him who alone can enable them to stand before himself (v. 19).
- ⁸ Once again, Peter here is quoting from the Old Testament. V. 18 has the same theme as Proverbs

11:31, "If the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?" (LXX)

⁹ Consider also 1 Peter 1:6, speaking of the Second Coming of Christ, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials." Recall the word for "distressed" is λυπέω (*lupēō*) which comes from the Greek λύπη (*lupē*) referencing deep and intense grief. It was used in the OT of the "toil" under which man would labor on account of the Fall (Genesis 3:17). It also was used of the "suffering/pain" which accompanies childbirth- also on account of the Fall (Genesis 3:16). Accordingly, "distress" speaks of the pain that accompanies life in a state of sin and misery- which again would include both physical illness, sickness, torture, as well as the mental anguish of sadness, sorrow, disappointment, and anxiety.

¹⁰ That is why in our distress on account of our sufferings, we oft-times are tempted to "curse God and die" (Job. 2:9). Do you recall the temptation Asaph faced on account of his suffering?, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning. [Yet] If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children." (Psalm 73:13-15)

¹¹ Christ's description of hell is so bad that any sane individual would be willing to cut off sensitive, irreplaceable parts of your body to avoid it (Matthew 5:29-30).

¹² The Puritan Thomas Vincent wrote, "Not only will the unbeliever be in hell, but hell will be in him too."

¹³ R.C. Sproul wrote, "There is no biblical concept more grim or terror-invoking than the idea of hell. It is so unpopular with us that few would give credence to it at all except that it comes to us from the teaching of Christ himself." (Sproul, 1998, p. 295)

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem wrote of this verse, "And therein also lies the knowledge that this suffering is only for our good: it is purifying us, drawing us closer to our Lord, and making us more like him in our lives. In all of it we are not alone, but we can depend on the care of a faithful Creator; we can rejoice in the fellowship of a Saviour who has also suffered (v. 13); we can exult in the constant presence of a Spirit of glory who delights to rest upon us (v. 14)." (Grudem, 2009, p. 192)

¹⁵ Such was the action of Paul when it came to each of the churches he planted, Acts 14:23!

¹⁶ Another great example of this is David in Psalm 31. I didn't have the time in the preaching of this sermon to use this in the sermon. However, if you have the time, dive into this great Psalm where David committed his soul unto the Lord!