



1 Peter 4:12-19

Surprised by Suffering

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1 Peter 4:12 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.

So Peter is continuing the most common theme in this book - the theme of suffering as a Christian, or walking through trials as Christians. He's trying to prepare his readers, and us by extension, for a life of following Christ that won't be characterized by ease, or by constant success, or by smooth sailing. But because it is a life of following Christ who went to the cross, we can expect, following in His footsteps, to experience hardship if we are committed to being faithful.

We'll walk through this section verse by verse today.

[1] Do Not Be Surprised by Trials (1 Peter 4:12)

1 Peter 4:12 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.

Peter starts this section by telling us not to be surprised when fiery trials come, and not to believe something strange or out-of-the-ordinary is happening.

And already that is an important reminder for us. Because we are often shocked when trials hit us as Christians. And maybe the biggest reason for our surprise is because of widespread belief in the prosperity Gospel.

And the prosperity Gospel claims that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. So if you are not prospering, it is because of a problem with your faith. If you believed more fully you'd be healed, if you just had faith you'd be more of a baller and wouldn't be driving what you drive. If you were better, you would be receiving better.

And the extreme forms of this are all over - the televangelist who asks you to put your hand on the TV screen and send him money so he can buy the private jet that God wants him to do his prospering in. And they sometimes promise that if you send him some cash, you are just sowing a seed, meaning you're going to get a cash harvest in return that far exceeds your gift.

And there are others who guarantee healing - God doesn't want you sick, they say, so there must be a way for you to be healed in this life, and faith somehow is the answer to unlock that healing.

So that's the extreme form of the prosperity Gospel and it certainly has a lot of adherents around the world, and the documentary American Gospel sheds light on this. But we've exported it, it is no longer just an American teaching, it's rampant in the global south now as well.

But most of Grace Road doesn't adhere to that. We know God is a healer and He does answer prayers, but we also know that sometime his answer is "no" or "not now." So it can be easy to think, "That false belief isn't my issue."

But we are probably all susceptible to a more subtle form of the prosperity Gospel that says that if I'm doing right, things should go well for me.

So, for a few examples, you work hard, you live with integrity, you pay your bills, and you have the expectation that, because you're working for God, He is working for you and you aren't expecting riches, but certainly wouldn't expect calamity either. And when calamity comes, you wonder why your faith has failed you.

Or you are doing all you can to raise your kids right. To raise them to know Christ, to live with integrity, with the expectation that they will follow Jesus - you've made the sacrifices so you expect your kids to turn out right, so you wouldn't expect any other results. But then one wanders and you wonder why you aren't seeing a return on all of your sacrifices and work.

Or maybe you're asking God to provide ways to serve him, and then when He answers not with an opportunity but with a trial to sanctify you, you doubt and disbelieve because that's not quite the answer or opportunity you were expecting as God's child.

Or you are headed toward marriage, and you are abstaining before marriage, expecting that you are building the foundation for a great marriage, and you have the expectation that because you did things right, it'll pay off in a great marriage. But the marriage is still hard.

Now here's where this is confusing: there is some truth to this. The Bible does teach the principle of sowing and reaping. The book of Proverbs has a lot of wisdom that generally tells us the way the world works and the way things generally go.

And it says things like:

Proverbs 10:4 “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”

Proverbs 22:6 “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

It tells us the way the world works. And it gives truisms. Now everybody knows there are exceptions - there are diligent people who have a medical crisis and go bankrupt and never become rich. There are children who depart from the ways their parents teach them.

But a proverb is not making a claim that 100 times out of 100 diligent people get rich. That's not what a proverb is - it's a general truism rather than a guarantee.

So I could say: “If you change your oil on time, your car could get 200,000 miles.” I'm not guaranteeing that - I'm speaking in a general way to guide, but not making an airtight promise (because we all know there are lots of other reasons a car couldn't get 200,000 miles.) Some people drive Nissans.

You could say 13 seconds isn't enough time to drive the length of the field and score. But there are exceptions. It depends who you're playing. Yeah that's usually true.

We speak proverbs to tell people how the world generally works. And these are helpful truisms: we should have confidence that when we go out and work hard and focus and pick up skills and maintain integrity that God made the world in such a way that that is often how we provide for our families and can expect increase as a result. There are exceptions - people get sick, people lack opportunities, there's real oppression in places. But often this it works.

1 Corinthians 9:10 talks about farmers who sow in hope - you plant seeds in the ground expecting a harvest. And we teach our kids the word, expecting and hopeful for a harvest. We do strive for purity and it can make a lot of things go better in marriage. We work hard expecting to bring home a good paycheck. And that's all God-blessed and God-ordained activity. The law of sowing and reaping does apply to an awful lot of life.

There are natural consequences of some choices being better than others. There is positive gain from making good choices.

But, also often, in a broken world, things don't go the way they should. There's a famine and the crops don't grow this year. The child wanders. The marriage that you worked so hard to wait for is hard and full of trials. There is brokenness that comes from just broken systems and bad choices and sins of others that didn't depend on you.

And while we might never send money to a televangelist promising us riches, we still believe a subtle prosperity Gospel when we become bitter against God when He allows suffering. When we question God's existence because we suffer.

When things don't go the way they should and we say, "Why is this happening to me? I tried to do everything right."

We believe the lie that God exists to make me happy. I'm not happy. Therefore God must not exist. Or, something is going wrong with my faith - I must be doing Christianity wrong, because this is hard. God must not love me. I must not be truly a Christian. Things work together for good for somebody else.

It's not supposed to go badly for me if God is real and I try to be good.

So I'm surprised at the fiery trial that has come my way.

Now Peter in this passage is dealing most specifically with the trials that come our way because we are following Christ in a world that opposes Him. There was a great persecution about to break out against the church in his day, where Christians would be burned publicly because they were blamed for burning Rome.

So it would literally be a fiery trial. And the most specific application is to Christians who are suffering public ridicule, rejection, and persecution because of their faith. But most of this can be broadly applied to any suffering that comes our way in a life of striving to faithfully follow Christ.

So the first thing Peter says is “don’t be surprised at trials.” They shouldn’t be a surprising part of a life that is lived to follow the One who went to the cross. That’s really the death-blow to the prosperity Gospel - Jesus went to the cross. That’s the least prosperous place anyone can go - no health, no wealth, no prosperity.

Now - He rose. And we will follow Him in that too - the end game for all Christians in his presence is total healing, total health, wealth, and prosperity. But those things aren’t guaranteed here in this life, but they are guaranteed when we resurrect like He did. So we are promised prosperity, with no hand on a TV screen and no cash mailed to Texas, but when we grab hold of Jesus by faith. So we do believe in a delayed prosperity Gospel - you might have to put in 90 years before you see that prosperity. But health, wealth, and prosperity is our inheritance that’s waiting for us then in His presence.

So don’t be surprised at trials here.

[2] Understand that Trials Test Us (1 Peter 4:12)

1 Peter 4:12 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.

Some of the trials we go through are because of brokenness in the world, and some are because of human evil that’s done against us. But regardless of the source, regardless of how fiery the trial is, each trial does test us - it allows us to see if we believe what we say we believe.

In 8th grade technology class, we all had to build little model bridges out of balsa wood sticks and glue, and at the end of the unit the teacher would put each one in a machine

that gradually increased the weight on the bridges until they buckled. And it was all to allow the design and construction of our bridges to be tested.

And the trials that come out way, likewise, put weight on our lives. And, though God already knows how well-built our faith really is, we don't. And we are good at deceiving ourselves. (I can convince myself my walk with Jesus is strong when life's pretty good, when in reality I'm just in a good mood because things are going well and there isn't any weight on me.)

We don't know all God is doing in allowing our tests, but we do know that one purpose of them is for us to see what our faith is truly made of.

Will we be ashamed of Christ when our faith is tested socially? Will we turn on one another and abandon one another when we see faults and flaws in one another, the really frustrating kind? Where will we turn for comfort when we have cause to be afraid? Will we resort to being our old selves when all the easy parts of Christianity are stripped away?

The trials that we go through are not good, in fact many of them come from sheer evil in someone else or just the misery in the world that came through sin entering creation. But some of the good that God allows through them is exposing to us what we really believe.

So Peter says not to be surprised at trials, recognize that one of their functions is to test us. And then he says:

[3] Rejoice as You Share Christ's Sufferings (1 Peter 4:13)

13 - But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

In the Bible, we don't have a call for us to be happy about suffering. We are told to mourn, we follow Jesus who mourns, we have Psalms at the center of our book where the Psalmists are crying out in the night to God as they go through suffering.

So be careful about thinking "I shouldn't be sad," or "I shouldn't be disappointed," or "I shouldn't be frustrated or confused." We're also not to deny reality and treat our suffering like it isn't real. The Christian Scientists, the people who built this building, taught that the

material world isn't that real - it's more like a dream, and you can be healed by coming to that truth.

But the biblical view on the material world is that it is real and it matters. Pain is real and painful.

But it calls us to rejoice not because we are suffering, but because suffering can be a reminder of where we're headed.

We tend to treat hardship as an indicator that we're on the wrong path, again in our soft prosperity Gospel theology.

But Peter says, "If you are sharing in Christ's suffering - you're suffering something like Jesus suffered, rejoice about that, because you are following in his footsteps, and His footsteps do end in resurrection and glory."

Suffering isn't an indicator we're on the wrong path, but can be an indicator that we're on the right one - and that right one has a glorious destination at the end of it.

So - I am experiencing grief. So did Jesus at the death of his friend. And he really felt it and really wept, so weep away. But rejoice, not in the loss itself, but in the fact that you're following Jesus' path that eventually does end in glory.

I am experiencing what seems like the triumph of evil around me. That's bad - pray about that, work to fix that to the extent that you can. And rejoice that we are following after the one who experienced the apparent triumph of evil but rose again in glory, and we will too.

I'm losing friends left and right because of trying to be a faithful Christian. Jesus experienced the loss of most of his followers - and rose in glory. So rejoice, not at the brokenness in relationships, but that broken relationships because of your faithfulness are not an indicator that you're on the wrong track, but on the Jesus track that ends in glory.

I'm not getting the answer I want to my prayers. Keep praying, keep seeking, keep asking. But keep rejoicing - Jesus prayed that the cup would pass from Him, it didn't, and he was faithful anyways and rose again in glory. You are headed toward glory.

So don't pretend the pain and loss isn't real. Weep and mourn. But rejoice at the glory that's coming.

He then mentions being insulted specifically:

[4] Count Insults as an Indicator of Blessing (1 Peter 4:14)

14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

He says if we are insulted for the name of Christ, which according to verse 12 we should expect, our present hope is that God's Spirit rests on us - he comes to minister to us personally. This isn't the future part of the reward but the present part - God is with us in it.

Here's our present prosperity: the Spirit of glory rests upon us. Jesus said this in Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus said rejoice and be glad. Because you have a kingdom now and a great reward waiting.

[5] Don't Bring Suffering on Yourselves (1 Peter 4:15-16)

Now, Peter knows people very well. He knows the temptation: to bring trouble on ourselves, but then treat it like persecution.

We'd all rather believe that we are great martyrs than great jerks.

1 Peter 4:15 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 ashamed¹, but let him glorify God in that name.

So he says some obvious things: if you are a murdered or a thief or someone actively doing evil, you will suffer what you might be tempted to call persecution. But it's not - it's that people don't like people who do evil, or steal, or murder them. That's off-putting.

But then he also says not to suffer as a meddler. (Alotriepiskopos - the bishop of another.) It's a busybody. Someone who jumps into affairs not his own. There's a certain type of person that likes to jump into the drama, likes to be involved in somebody else's problems even when they're not asking, likes to be in the know (and busybodies are closely associated with gossips in the New Testament -

1 Timothy 5:13 “Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.”

Sometimes we will jump into issues without knowledge, rush to the defense of someone who isn't asking for it and long before we have the information, and join in loving to be outraged. When we're called on it, we then claim persecution.

And Peter says here there is a shameful kind of suffering we bring on ourselves, when we overtly do evil and suffer for it, or when we're annoying busybodies and meddlers.

Nosy people who don't mind their own business aren't being persecuted when people push back. To be a busybody is a proud overestimation of our own wisdom, our own indispensability in peoples issues, and it comes from a sense that I'm sovereign, I have to rule things and hold things together. And Peter says don't suffer for that.

¹ One help in this is to also learn the lives of those who rejoiced in Christ's sufferings. Know the stories of the martyrs, read how they bore their trials. Consider it a blessing to suffer for righteousness' sake.

Examples -

The Execution of Lady Jane Grey

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-execution-of-lady-jane-grey-460-years-ago-today/>).

Polycarp's execution

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/polycarp-testimony>

There is a suffering we cause, a shameful kind. But there is also suffering for faithfulness that is nothing to be ashamed of.

Now we might be tempted to think that if all of these problems come our way because we are Christians, it would be better not to be one:

[6] Remember Christians Still Have It Better (1 Peter 4:17-18)

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?"

This seems to be referring to:

Malachi 3:1-5 "1 "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 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, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. 5 "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

So in this passage, Malachi the prophet said the Lord would come near to his house, the temple. And there he would sit as a refining and cleansing judge, judging and sifting his people, refining and cleaning his community. And after that he would judge those outside the temple.

And Peter seems to point to this motif to say: "You have these trials among you, and God is using them to test you. Right now - at this time - judgment has started among God's people."

So would it be easier to just give up on Christianity then?

Peter says that the outcome will still be better for Christians. Because God will judge everyone - and outside of Christ there's no hope for salvation and mercy.

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

We can, if we take a very short-sighted view of things, think, "non-Christians have it better - there's less suffering." But Peter is saying, "Don't forget the plan. There are trials for everybody, and Christians have even more suffering because they're Christians sometimes. And those trials test us and reveal whose faith is real and can bear the weight. But then there is judgment. And nobody will say, when Jesus's glory is revealed, that it would have been better not to be a Christian.

Don't forget our hope.

And if you are here today and you are not a believer in Christ - we don't have prosperity in this life to promise you. In fact, we can almost guarantee that life will be harder if you become a Christian.

But becoming a Christian is still the best thing that can happen to you. Because all of us will eventually be tried, all will be tested. And sadly, we all fall short.

But if we recognize that we're falling short now, in this life, we can find forgiveness in Jesus. We can come to Him by faith, believing that he paid for us, we can turn from our sins, and we can - right now in our seats - call out to him to ask for forgiveness and life.

But in Jesus there's salvation.

And Christians, knowing trials will come our way, here's Peter's final exhortation along those lines:

[7] Trust the Lord and Do Good (1 Peter 4:19)

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

Entrust ourselves to God, and keep doing good.

Trust that he knows what he is doing.

Believe what Job said:

Job 13:15 “Though he slay me, I will hope in him, yet I will argue my ways to his face.”

I’m going to make my case to God, I’m going to ask Him to end this suffering, I’m going to cry out when I’m confused, but at the end of the day, if he decides the suffering keeps going, I’m gonna trust him.

And Peter says, “Keep doing good” - even if the laws of sowing and reaping don’t seem to be working, even if it seems like you’ve sown so much effort and you’re only pulling up weeds, even though the world isn’t working the way it should, trust your Creator and do good. He is faithful.

We will see Him. The suffering will end. There will come a harvest. And though we sow in tears we will reap in joy.

Prayer of Confession, Adapted from a prayer entitled “Finding Fault with God” in the prayer book, Streams of Mercy by Barbara Duguid.

Father,

So often we haven’t responded to suffering like this. We grumble and complain as though you don’t know our needs or care how we suffer. We argue with your providence, as though we are wiser and kinder than you are. Our hearts flare with anger toward you when you don’t answer our prayers as we wish, or do our bidding. Father, forgive us for talking back to you. You would be just to destroy us instantly for our great sin. Instead, you have chosen to love us and to show us how patient and kind you are with foolish, weak, and bitter children.

Father, thank you. Holy Spirit, remind us often of the humility of Christ in our place. Though our hearts rise daily to accuse and condemn our Maker, he stood silent as a lamb and went to be slaughtered for our sin. He trusted himself to his Father in all things, without fear, grumbling, or complaining. When we talk back to God, show us our hearts and show us Christ. Though our sin weighs us down, his goodness lifts us up to heaven, where he stands today praying and interceding for us. Give us faith to believe that you

are wiser and kinder than we could ever be. Give us the desire and strength to follow your commands, for without you we are nothing and can do nothing. We thank you that we cannot resist your will, and that you will always have your way with us in spite of all our sin. In our weakness, glorify our great Savior, whose love will never let us go, and whose death and shining obedience are enough to save all those who trust in him.

Amen.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Why are we often so surprised that trials come our way?
- 2) What trials have you recently experienced?
- 3) In what ways have trials tested your faith? How did you do on the test? What did you learn about your faith?
- 4) What is the difference between the claims of the prosperity Gospel and verses like Proverbs 10:4 that seems to promise financial reward for diligent work?
- 5) In what ways might you subtly believe a “soft” version of the prosperity Gospel? What are the effects on your walk with Christ?
- 6) Are there any ways you have brought suffering on yourself, but took false comfort in it being “persecution” or on account of your faith, when instead it was a result of your sin?
- 7) How is 1 Peter 4:17-18 a comfort and encouragement for suffering Christians? What does it remind us of?