



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Peter 4:12-19

1 Peter

“Trial by Fire”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this evening is 1 Peter 4:12-19. Before we read it, let’s ask the Lord to bless our time together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness to us and your grace extended to us in ways that we don’t even see. It comes to us so frequently, so constantly that we take it for granted. We confess that. We often times don’t give you the thanks and the praise that we should because we are so used to the good things of this world and this life.

Sometimes it must be taken away. Sometimes we must go through difficulty. Sometimes we must go through persecution and great suffering. We consider that this evening and yet even in that, Peter tells us that we’re to rejoice because a good result follows from it and it has a good purpose.

So help us to understand that, Father, and help us to be thankful in all things and to give you praise for every aspect of our life, deepen our understanding and our appreciation of you that we might be able to do that, that we might be men and women who give praise and thanksgiving continually.

We thank you for the time this evening and the opportunity to study your bible, what you have entrusted to us, your revelation and we pray that we would grow as we do so and bless the other meetings that are taking place for the young people this evening. Bless them, too. Then bless our time of prayer afterward as we, again, approach the throne of grace and intercede for those who have asked for our prayers.

We look to you to bless now and we pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Peter writes in verse 12 of chapter 4, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing as though some strange

thing were happening to you, but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exaltation.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer or thief or evil doer or a troublesome meddler, but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but to glorify God in this name 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 that 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? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right.”

Peter is continuing the theme of persecution or the theme of living as a Christian in a hostile world. It is a major theme of his book. Perhaps the central theme of his book. He begins it or he resumes it with what on the face of it must seem like a surprising statement. “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you.” Fiery ordeal. That sounds horrifying. Not to mention surprising.

How can you not be surprised and shutter at such a thing, but doesn't it also seem strange when you think about it, doesn't it seem surprising that the very people who bring the greatest blessing to mankind are the people who are despised and persecuted and killed by mankind and, of course, the answer to all of the above, everything I've said, is yes.

It is a shocking thing to have as a prospect a fiery ordeal and it's surprising that the world would persecute those who really bring the greatest blessing to it, but Peter's point here is that when you understand the nature of man, you shouldn't be surprised by his hostility toward the Christian and toward the Gospel.

Man is fallen. Man is sinful and he is hostile toward the truth. We know that from the word of God from Genesis 4. Well, we could go to Genesis 3 where Adam sins against the word of God, but then you see it in his descendants and Cain and his response. We have that all through the Bible. We come to John 3:19 and we read that men loved the darkness rather than the light. That's the nature of man.

So if you understand some basic theology, if you understand the doctrine of total depravity, then you will not be surprised by the hostility of the world toward the Gospel. Probably saw the cartoon this past week or the article about it in the *Dallas Morning News*, B.C. I didn't see it. I didn't see the cartoon, but someone gave me the article that was written about the controversy that followed. In the article one local Baptist minister

objected to the cartoon because of the Christian message that it gave. He objected because it suggested that Christianity is the only viable religious perspective.

That comment is telling and typical of the criticism of the article, but it's a little surprising I guess it seems to us that a Baptist minister that would make such a statement. There are many religious perspectives. We know that, but there is only one viable, if we want to call it a religious perspective, I don't really like that terminology, but there is only one viable way. There is only one way to God and that is through his son the Lord, Jesus Christ and a Baptist minister should certainly know that. If you just read the Bible it's quite clear.

It was a conflict with Cain and Abel from the beginning, but we find it all the way through. We come to the gospel of John again and read John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes unto the Father but by me.” Or Acts 4:12, just to name 2 of a plethora of verses in the Bible that teach the one way to God; the exclusivity of Christianity and the gospel. That's the problem, you see. Christianity is exclusive and the world hates that. The Roman world, the world of Paul's _____ hated that. It tolerated all kinds of religions.

Christians would have been permitted to worship Christ as long as they took a pinch of incense and offered it on the alter to Caesar and worshipped him as well. It's okay to worship your God as long as you recognize all of the other gods. They had a pluralistic society just as we do.

The problem with the world is when things become exclusive and you say, “Everyone's wrong except this position. Every position is wrong, but this position.” So, as a result, the world reacts just as people did in that article over a cartoon. They react that way over a simple cartoon, think what they'll do when you nail a 95 theses on a chapel door or you write something more significant and you make the message clear that all who do not believe are under the wrath of God and there's only one way out and that's through Jesus Christ, they will pour out fire on Christians in reaction. That's the world, but if you don't understand the nature of man, if you don't understand total depravity, you may very well be surprised by what happens in a fallen world.

We shouldn't be surprised by the world's response to the Gospel and the Gospel life, living a life that's consistent to it. We will be mocked if we live consistently with the word of God just as we'll be mocked and ridiculed if we proclaim the word of God. We know that and shouldn't be surprised about that. Not only because that's the nature of man,

but because the Lord gave us specific instruction along those lines and warned us about that.

In John 15:8-20, he said if the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. Of course, we know they did persecute him. Therefore, they will persecute us if we're living like he lived. If we are bearing his name and his word before the world, the world will respond to us as it responded to him because we're his representatives.

But we shouldn't be surprised by the fiery ordeal also because we, too, are sinners and God uses the wicked for a good purpose. “It comes upon you for your testing”, Peter says. It happens in order to purge us of sin just as fire separates pure metal from dross. We go through a period of affliction, a fiery ordeal, for that purpose.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 27:21, “The crucible is for silver and the fern is for gold.” It refines those metals. Fire refines and Peter would add persecution is for the soul. It purifies it.

While such experiences are horrible, they are and I find myself as I'm going through this lesson and thinking about this and reading the commentaries and writing things that I know must be written that are consistent with what Peter's saying and reading things about rejoicing and all, finding myself, asking myself, can you really do that. The persecution that the church has gone through over the ages has been horrifying.

So I have to say these are horrible experiences. No one in his right mind would wish for something on himself or herself, but still there is good that comes out of this. This is what Peter's going to encourage these Christians with. It tests us. It proves our character. So for the Christian there is a positive outcome from the fiery ordeal.

So, Peter was encouraging his readers to see God's purpose in the hard times that they were facing, the hard times they had already experienced to some degree. Through those difficulties, God would enable them to grow stronger in the faith and through that, to glorify him. He explains that in the next verses. Suffering is not strange. It is a normal part of the Christian life; a normal part of the Christian life that's lived with vitality. A normal part of the Christian life that is consistent with Christ, his character and his teaching. So rather than be disturbed, they were to rejoice, verse 13, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.”

There are a number of places where Peter could have gotten this imagery of the fiery ordeal as a description of persecution. Proverbs 27:21, which I quoted just a moment ago. Perhaps Malachi 3, which I'll consider toward the end of the lesson, but if Peter wrote from Babylon and that is where the letter is said to originate from, there's some question as to what that means. Is that literally Babylon or is that code for Rome, but if he did write from the city of Babylon, literally Babylon, then the experience of the three Hebrews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in Nebuchadnezzar fiery furnace, may have come to mind while he was there as he thought about the fiery ordeal.

You'll remember they suffered for Christ. They suffered for their faith and Christ was with them in the furnace. You'll remember that scene. Nebuchadnezzar has them tossed into the fiery furnace and those who were the instruments of that, the agents of throwing them in were destroyed by the fire as they approached it. It was so hot. It had been rekindled and made even hotter because of Nebuchadnezzar's rage that these men would not bow down to the golden image that he had erected, but he was amazed that they had survived the fire and also amazed that there was a fourth person in the fire with them who looked to be as a son of the gods he said.

Now that was a test that proved their faith. It proved that they were true children of God and trials do that for us. So for that reason they are reason for rejoicing. They prove that we are genuine. That we're true believers. That we are children of God. Suffering for Christ confirms that we belong to him.

Our suffering will lead to great rejoicing when we realize that we are suffering what Christ suffered. We are suffering for him. That was one of Paul's great prayers in Philippians 3:10, "I may know him and the power of his resurrection in the fellowship of his sufferings." He wanted to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings 'cause he loved Christ and wanted to experience that for him.

So, there is reason for rejoicing in that, but reason for rejoicing because it confirms that we belong to him. Then when Christ returns there's great reward for that. Peter says also, "At the revelation of his glory you will rejoice with exaltation."

You'll remember the outcome of that event with the three Hebrew young people, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego they were vindicated; vindicated by the Lord being with them in the midst of the fire. They were brought up and Nebuchadnezzar honored them. So vindicated through that fire and through Christ's blessing of them and honored as a result. The same will be true for us when the Lord returns only more so.

We'll be honored in a way far greater than anything that those young men experienced. So there'll be great exaltation. Those who have suffered for the faith faithfully have endured the sufferings of Christ. Suffer for him. Suffer for the reasons that he suffered. They will be greatly blessed.

Peter then gives a special example, a specific example of persecution in verse 14. That of being reviled for the name of Christ. The verb tense, it's a present tense indicates that this is a continuous reviling. It goes on over a long period of time or a period of time, but the blessing is also a present one as well. Being reviled is evidence that, he says, “The spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

That is a blessing. That persecution evidences the reality that the spirit of God rests upon individuals. That he is a part of the sufferers life and his presence in the believer in a time like that gives strength. It enables the individual to endure and to triumph. He calls him the spirit of glory, which probably suggests that in that time of suffering there is the experience of glory. That he gives us a foretaste of the glory to come.

So while the future blessing and reward comes when Christ returns, there is present blessing, present reward also and that's in the spirit's presence and the experience of his life and ministry in us.

It seems to me Peter is suggesting by that that that is particularly evident. That experience of the spirit of God, the spirit of glory is particularly evident in the individual during a time of suffering, during a time of persecution.

You'll remember when the Lord was speaking to the disciples toward the end of his ministry, the Olivet discourse in Mark 13, he tells them about the hardships that will come, the suffering that will come, they will be arrested. They'll be brought into the synagogues. He says to them in Mark 13:11 that what they are given, they will speak, but it won't be them that is speaking. They will be speaking by the Holy Spirit. They will be enabled to respond to charges that will be made and to say the right things in very difficult circumstances and times when I suspect they would be normally unnerved and unable to speak coherently or have control of their faculties. They will be able to do that because the spirit of God will enable them to do so.

We read about that in Acts 4 when Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin and in verse 13 we read that the men of the Sanhedrin were amazed that these men who'd not been educated were speaking so well and so boldly. I assume that's an example of

what Peter’s talking about here. He writes from experience. Those who go through suffering will experience the life of the spirit within them. That’s a great blessing.

Now in verses 15 and 16 Peter gives a warning about suffering. It is similar to the warning that he gave earlier in chapter 2 in verse 20 against being treated harshly for sinning. Here he warns against suffering for sin. “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer or thief or evil doer or troublesome meddler.” That last word, troublesome meddler, is rare. It means meddling in affairs which are not our concern. Poking our nose in other people’s business I guess and not minding our business. Christians don’t always suffer for the faith. Sometimes they suffer for doing things they shouldn’t have done. Sometimes they suffer for their foolishness.

Gordon Clark in his commentary says, “We are to have a concern for the souls of men, but we are not called upon to meddle in their affairs.” That’s a good word. We’re not supposed to do that. We’re not supposed to straighten everybody out and get involved in their lives; give the Gospel. We’re to be peacemakers.

Well, the other sins that he mentions here are obvious. “If a Christian commits crime, he or she deserves whatever punishment, whatever suffering comes.” These aren’t the causes of suffering that Peter applauds. He’s saying be careful; don’t bring trouble on yourself. Live a law abiding, honorable life. Live a life above reproach. Do the right thing.

It is suffering as a Christian that concerns Peter. Suffering for Christ. Suffering for the Gospel and a life that’s patterned after the life of Christ. He writes in verse 16, “If anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed.” Well, be ashamed because that word Christian was a name that was given to bring shame upon those that carried the name. It was a name that was coined by the pagans in Antioch. You may remember that from the book of Acts in chapter 11 and verse 26. This is the only other place that it occurs outside of the Book of Acts in that one text.

So the non-Christian world considered it a shameful thing to be known as a Christian and certainly a shameful thing to bear the reproach of Christ. A shameful thing to suffer for his name. Peter’s saying don’t consider it shameful at all. The world may think it’s shameful, but God does not. God honors those who suffer for his namesake.

The word Christian that he uses here probably still carried a sense of reproach, particularly among the Jews. Among the pagans as well, but Peter is stating that instead of being ashamed of that name, they were to do the opposite. They were to glorify God in that

name. They were to act in such a way that they bring honor to God or honor in or with the name of being a Christian.

Regardless of the significance that the word had in the first century, even if it was used disparagingly, the name Christian identified them with Christ. It said they were followers of Christ. That’s the meaning of the word. So in carrying that name and being known as Christians, they were known as representatives of Christ. They were representing him. Really to be associated with the name of Christ, even if the world considers it disparaging, a reproachful name, it is not a disgrace. It’s a great honor.

Peter’s saying don’t be ashamed of that. Don’t be ashamed of being called a Christian. Don’t be ashamed of being associated with Jesus Christ. There’s no greater honor in the world than that. In the end, it’ll be quite clear. It’ll be a time of great rejoicing when Christ returns.

Now in verse 17 Peter gives perspective on sufferings, the sufferings of Christians. He explains these sufferings. The fiery ordeal, the purifying fire of persecution is the judgment of God. “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?”

The word judgment here doesn’t always mean condemnation. It’s a little bit broader than that. It can mean a judgment that results in a good or a bad evaluation. It’s used, for example, 1 Corinthians 6:7 of lawsuits where good and bad is determined. So it can be judgment that results in approval or discipline as well as condemnation. It seems to have all those meanings in this context.

The picture that Peter gives here is of God beginning his judgment within the church that will later move outside of the church and into the world. No one will escape God’s judgment, but Christian’s are being purified and strengthened by it. Delivered of sins and drawn close to Christ as a result of this and enabled through this purging process, this judgment to progress in holiness.

Now the word that’s translated household of God is the Greek word that means house. So many feel that a better translation is that. House of God. So that the illusion here is to the temple.

The reason that commentators have put some emphasis upon that is because it seems to make, if we take it house of God, a clearer connection with some Old Testament

texts, that seem to be in Peter’s mind that seem to be in the background of this statement of the two texts are Ezekiel 9 and Malachi 3.

In Ezekiel 9, it’s a brief chapter about judgment on Jerusalem. In that text God calls for six executioners to judge Jerusalem. A mark is put on the forehead of everyone who grieves over sin, everyone who’s been greatly afflicted over the sins and the terrible sins that have taken place in Jerusalem. God has abandoned the people they say. People have been taken off to Babylon. God’s not with us anymore. He doesn’t see what we’re doing. So they have engaged in all kinds of sin.

So judgment comes. A mark is placed upon the forehead of those who are righteous and then at God’s command, the executioners move out and slay everyone else in the city. They move out from the altar. They move through the temple and they go throughout the city slaying everyone; young and old, male and female, children and old people alike.

In verse 6 of Ezekiel 9, God speaks. He says, “You will start from my sanctuary.” So they started with the elders who are before the temple and begin slaying these people. Well, the language between that text and Ezekiel and our text in 1 Peter 4:17 is similar. Peter speaks of a beginning or starting with this judgment with the house of God.

So Peter seems to have Ezekiel 9 in mind. It’s not saying that this is the fulfillment of Ezekiel 9, but the principle of God beginning in the sanctuary, God beginning with his people and moving out to the world is a principle that finds some support in this text and seems to be the background for what he is describing here because the house of God is now the church or a kingdom of priests. So God begins with his people to purify them. That judgment will then move out into the world of the unbeliever.

There may also be a connection here with Malachi 3:1-3, which speaks of fire in a way that’s similar to the fiery ordeal. In fact, you might look over at Malachi 3, last book of the Old Testament. Malachi writes, “Behold. I am going to send my messenger and he will clear 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, 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 _____ soap.” He goes on to speak about purifying the Levites, the priests, so that they will offer pure sacrifices.

The application to us as believer priests is that God will purify us. God begins by purifying his people. That judgment goes out from the church into the world. It goes from

purifying judgment to condemning judgment. So Peter writes, “If it begins with us first, what will be the outcome of those who do not obey the Gospel?” Seems to use the kind of logical argument that Paul is famous for using. An argument from the lesser to the greater to show how terrible the judgment will be for the unbeliever.

The doom that awaits the world is terrible. If God hates evil within the church, if he hates evil among his redeemed people and punishes it, what will he do with evil among the unredeemed, the unregenerate. If he deals with the church, how will he deal with the world. How much greater it will be, the judgment. Of course, the answer is it will be utter destruction.

Now he develops that same idea in verse 18, “And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?” The implication is that the godless man will be destroyed. Paul makes that very clear in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, he writes, “For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from Heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” Judgment will come on the world. The Bible assures us of that, but it is also a fact and Peter underscores this that “the righteous”, as he says, “are saved with difficulty.”

That goes back to the fiery ordeal and all that he has been speaking of. The judgment that comes within the church that begins with us. It comes with difficulty because God disciplines us. He deals with us. We know that from Hebrews 12, “As a father disciplines his children.” So, it is with difficulty that we enter salvation.

Now that does not mean that the salvation of the believer is ever in any doubt. We are eternally secure. Peter has himself made that plain earlier in chapter 1 in verse 5. He said that we are protected by the power of God through faith. So God enables us to persevere and the saint does persevere to the end. The difficulty is with the way of salvation. It's with the road to salvation.

This life is a life in which God deals with us. We are his temple and his presence in us is a great blessing. We're blessed more than anyone in the world. The richest individuals in the world cannot compare with the blessing that the poorest Christian in the world has because we possess the spirit of God, but because we are his temple, he will not allow us to go our own way. He will not allow us to defile that temple. He disciplines us. He judges his people in order to purify them.

So we need to be purifying ourselves if we want to avoid his discipline, but since we are his temple we shouldn't be surprised, as Peter said, if the judgment begins with us.

And what are we to do in such situations when the fiery ordeal is among us. Well, we are to do right and we're to trust God. That is how Peter ends the chapter. Verse 19, "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right." It really summarizes the teaching of the whole book. Suffering does not happen by accident. We're not victims of blind fate. It only happens by the will of God.

Now that at first seems very difficult to understand. Verse 12 Peter said, "Don't be surprised by the fiery ordeal." But it's very surprising when we learn that the fiery ordeal is according to God's will. That is for many people a very hard idea to accept. It almost seems like God, in whom we trust, our Father, is bringing our enemies against us, he is becoming our enemy. He brings the fiery ordeal upon us. How can a good God do that to his children whom he loves.

But I think Wayne Grudem is correct when he writes that, "Upon reflection no better comfort and suffering can be found than this. It is God's good and perfect will." Now think about it. Would it be better if our suffering were contrary to God's will? We're going to suffer anyway. We go through difficulties. That is life for anybody. Would we have more comfort in knowing that God had no hand in it? That we were suffering because God did not control things? Would we gain some comfort in the idea that the suffering we go through has no meaning, no purpose at all? No, of course not.

The fact that we are suffering according to God's will means that he's in complete control of it. He controls the intensity of it. He controls the duration of it. He puts limits on it and all of it is used for a good purpose. I may not see the purpose in it. I may not feel as though there's a good purpose in it at the time, but by faith, and that's how we live as Christians. We live by faith. By faith in what God tells us. By faith I know that it is. Surely that has to give comfort.

The enemy or the disease is not in control. The enemy may think that it is in control, but it is not. God controls everything and uses the enemy to sanctify his people causing us to draw close to him, causing us to draw away from the sins that so easily entangle us. So there's great encouragement in that.

We see this in other passages of the Bible. We have the Book of Job. The whole book teaches that principle. God gave Satan permission to afflict Job, but he set limits on

Job’s activity. It was, however, according to God’s will. As a consequence, Job grew. Job matured. At the end of the book after he goes through all of the debates with his friends and all of the reasoning and trying to understand it, he finally realizes this is all of God and he says, “I am insignificant. I know you can do all things and I repent in dust and ashes.” That affliction refined Job. He became a greater man through it.

Did the same for the apostle Paul. He was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment him, to keep him from exalting himself and it did. He prayed three times that it be removed, which tells us it was not a pleasant experience. Again, I don’t want to speak lightly of these things and I’ve said it before and it’s true. It’s very easy to speak rather boldly about suffering and hardship and fiery ordeals when you’re not going through it. I’ve never been through something like that. I must confess. But I know what the scriptures are teaching.

I know what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12. That it was given for a good purpose. He prayed that the thorn be removed. God said no. “My grace is sufficient for you.” He learned the sufficiency of God’s grace through that. He knew it already, but he learned it to a greater degree and he discovered through that thorn that when he’s weak he’s really strong. Made him a greater servant and he learned to trust in Christ all the more.

So, all of this was for Paul and for Job, good. Good comes out of affliction. That’s why Peter says we’re to rejoice. That’s why he can encourage the people in the face of the fiery ordeal. God never abandons us to that ordeal. In the darkest moment we are not alone. He’s with us. The dark times only come by God’s good pleasure and his wise design and we can depend on him as our faithful creator. That’s what Peter calls him.

Paul and Job learned to do that. They learned to trust God through affliction. He is faithful and he is sovereign. He is the creator. Speaks of his sovereignty. He’s in complete control of all things. That’s what Peter encourages us to do. He encouraged us to entrust ourselves or commit ourselves to him.

One of the commentators pointed out that the Hellenistic world, the world of Paul’s, they lacked our modern banking system. Someone undertaking a journey didn’t have a bank or a safe deposit box in which to put his or her valuables. So what they would do is they would entrust them to a neighbor. So that meant for the person who was going to go away on a journey, the great question in his or her mind was the integrity of the neighbor. Can they be trusted.

Well, if we apply that to the Lord, his integrity is impeccable. He can be absolutely trusted to protect us because his power is unlimited, his wisdom is perfect and his character is pure. He is faithful, Peter says. Can be trusted for everything and he is the creator. He is the architect of the universe. Everything follows his design. He knows it perfectly. He controls it completely. The hairs on our head are numbered. He feeds the sparrows. Aren't you more important than that? Of course you are.

So, this is his world and he will take care of us. That's what we're to understand and we're to entrust ourselves, commit ourselves to him not only in the sense of fleeing to him for refuge, we're to do that, but also having fled to him in refuge, go out into the world in the refuge of Christ trusting in him and live an obedient life doing good, being a witness in the midst of a hostile world in the face of a fiery ordeal.

Now, what Peter wrote would have been an encouragement not only to these Christians throughout Asia Minor, but throughout the empire. I'm sure that shortly after it was sent, the letter that Peter wrote, 1 Peter, was sent to those churches in Asia Minor, it circulated throughout the empire and it came to Rome. Peter's words would have been somewhat prophetic for them because terrible persecution came on the church shortly after this and persecution, that was literally a fiery ordeal.

The great fire of Rome occurred in '64. It burned down much of the city. Many people were left homeless. They became very hostile and they suspected that Nero was the perpetrator of that fire. He thought of himself as a great builder. He wanted to rebuild Rome. Do it better. Do it the way he wanted it done. So he burned down a large portion of the city, but to divert the hostility of the people he blamed it on this new sect, this new religion, the Christians in the city.

The hostility was taken out on them and that became the first great persecution of the church. Christians were martyred in horrible ways, in the most sadistic of ways. Some Christians Nero covered in pitch and he turned them into human torches to light his gardens at night. It was literally a fiery ordeal.

The only way that a person could endure such treatment objectively at least is to know that God ultimately is ordaining all things. What occurs, affliction, is according to the will of God. Not that he approves of that or delights in it in any way. He certainly doesn't. It is an abomination to him, but he uses it in the life of God's people, in the church and not only in the immediate group that is suffering, but throughout the ages. Of course those Christians became a great witness and testimony to many others.

Often what is the case is that Christians who suffer, that suffering becomes an occasion for others to come into the faith. When the Smithfield martyrs in England died being burned at the stake at the time of the reformation, Mary Tudor who perpetrated that, did so in order to crush Protestantism. The consequence was just the opposite. The people of the area began to weep over those who had suffered so terribly. They reverently gathered up the ashes of the martyrs and they disposed of them. People actually became Christians as a result of those suffering saints. So it has happened through the ages.

We look at these things and they're horrifying. They truly are, but God has a purpose in it and for us to be able to deal with this and to be prepared for it, we must know that that's the case and know that these things will happen. We will suffer. We'll either suffer reproach or we may suffer the literal fiery ordeal that others have suffered.

So to prepare for that we must know that it's going to happen. This is the nature of the world in which we live. God tells us it's going to happen. The way to prepare for that is also to know him. To draw close to him. To feed on his word. That's how we grow. That's how we become strong and know that the spirit of God, which is within us and rests upon us, he enables us in the worst of times. God is faithful. He's the faithful creator.

Well, may God help us to draw close to him and to live lives that are pleasing to him that we might be lights in the world and that we might share the sufferings of Christ and do so with joy. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the testimony of the apostle in this text and the warning that he gives us. These things will happen. We live in a fallen world, an evil world that hates you and hates your truth and it will hate us if it sees you in us. May that not cause us to back down from such a thing as the fiery ordeal. May it give us courage to live lives that are pleasing to you and suffer with joy as a result. Strengthen us. Give us a hunger for your truth. Cause us to walk closely with you. Bless our time as we continue before the throne of grace. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.