



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Peter 4:12-19

Fall 2024

"The Fiery Ordeal"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth. Good morning to all of you, and it is good to have you here, (and it's good for me to be here...I'm thankful for that). And I say, "Amen!", to that announcement of thanks for all the letters, and the prayers, and all—and I think I'm doing well.

Well, we are in chapter 4 of 1 Peter. We resumed that last week, and looked at verses 1 through 11. We're going to finish chapter 4 this morning with verses 12 through 19, a very interesting passage;

¹² 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; ¹³ 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 exultation. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; ¹⁶ but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? 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.

1 Peter 4: 12-19

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow in prayer.

Father what a privilege it is to be together with Your people. It is a blessing to be physically with one another on a Sunday morning, and join together in worship and in study. And we don't really separate the two; they are distinct, but a study of Your Word should lead us in worship; and I pray that that will be the occasion this morning of our time together. We thank You for the great privilege and the blessing of possessing the Bible—66 books of revelation, Your inerrant Word, and the authority for our life and practice. And we come to a very interesting passage this morning, Father—a challenging passage, really. And so we pray that You would give us understanding, and You will give us enablement to do the very things that Peter urged his readers to do 2000 years ago. The world is just as hostile today as it was then, and we can face the fiery trials that they faced as well. Prepare us for that. Prepare us for the difficulties that we face every day for they are used of You for our good—and we give You praise and thanks for that.

We pray now LORD, that You'd bless us as we continue our service. We pray that You would bless us this week, and give everybody a wonderful Thanksgiving. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) Someone defined war as, "Long periods of boredom, punctuated by moments of sheer terror." Well, that's the spiritual war that we are in every day. It's generally very 'daily'—life is 'routine'; but then, periodically throughout history, the routine is interrupted, and punctuated by persecution, ('moments of sheer terror').

Peter's letter was written in one of those moments. The churches of Asia Minor were suffering great trials; and he had written words of instruction and encouragement to guide them through the terror.

He began this last passage of chapter 4 with a warning, (which on the face of it might seem surprising); "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you..." (vs12). That expression, "*fiery ordeal*", (or literally; "*burning*"), was probably not intended by Peter to be taken literally, but as a way of describing trials, persecution, as a 'refining event'.

But it has been literal. In the mid-16th century ministers, trained at Calvin's College in Geneva, were sent into France to be missionaries; to preach the Gospel—and in doing that they put their lives at risk. Five students went out from Lausanne, Switzerland, to Lyon, France—and were captured. They were held in prison for a year before being led to their execution. Each one was tied to a stake and burned.

And such things would happen to the Christians not many years after Peter advised the churches not to be surprised by "the fiery ordeal." But Peter's meaning here was not, 'Don't be shocked or shudder at the horror of it.' ...(that's impossible, it's a terrifying thing to face something like that). Rather he meant, 'Don't be surprised that men, that the world, would do such thing.' Mankind is fallen, (and we were reminded of that by Allen in his lesson this morning). Men and women are sinful and hostile to the truth. "...men love the darkness rather than the Light...", John wrote in John 3:19, "...for their deeds were evil." They hate the Light. They hate truth, and Christ—and they oppose them whenever they can, whenever they are exposed to it.

That's the doctrine of *Total Depravity*, and we need to understand that doctrine. It is not that all men are monsters and are as bad as they can be—but that all people are infected, totally, in every aspect of their being, by sin. Maybe we could illustrate it by taking a pure glass of water and then dropping a little bit of cyanide in it. Well, you don't have, 'a little bit of that glass that is affected'; no, the whole thing, all of the water is affected by that. That's total depravity.

And that accounts for man's behavior. Naturally, apart from grace and being born again, people are darkened in their minds; their wills are bent against God and towards self. I think it was Luther that spoke of the soul as, "curved in on itself." We are covered in guilt—but man, (mankind), doesn't want to hear that, doesn't want to hear they're guilty. They love the darkness; they are comfortable in it. The Light, the truth, the Gospel, troubles them and they react—and sometimes they react furiously.

So Peter was telling the churches not to be surprised—that is what happens when the church is living and active. (Not that they are surprised, but that they are persecuted.) That's the consequence so often; it stirs up something in men. When the Light is shining, the world reacts; they try to put it out; they try to silence the witness.

But we shouldn't be surprised by the "fiery ordeal" also because, we too, are sinners. We're forgiven, but we're still sinners. And God uses the wicked for a good purpose; it "...comes upon you for your testing...", Peter said. (vs12).

The ordeal happens in order to purge us of sin—just as fire separates pure metal from dross. Solomon taught that idea in Proverbs 27 verse 21; "The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold." (and Peter would have added, 'Persecution is for the soul'). And while such experiences are horrible, no one in his right mind would wish them on himself or herself. Still they test and prove our character; and for the Christian there is a positive outcome. So Peter was encouraging his readers to see God's purpose in the hard times they were experiencing; through them, God would enable them to grow stronger in faith and to glorify Him.

He explains that in the next verses. Suffering is not "strange", (vs12), it is a normal part of the Christian life. So rather than being disturbed, they were to rejoice: Verse 13, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing...". So he's referring especially to suffering for one's faith.

There are a number of places where Peter could have gotten this image of the "fiery ordeal" to describe this persecution and suffering, this *burning*, as a description for that. If Peter actually wrote this epistle from Babylon, (and there's some debate

about that; and we covered this, I think in the first lesson), the experience that the three Hebrews in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace may have come to his mind while there.

You'll remember, (in Daniel chapter 3), that they wouldn't bow to the king's image. Nebuchadnezzar had had a dream of an image that Daniel interpreted in chapter 2. It had various elements of metal: Gold was the top, (and it represented Nebuchadnezzar) —then silver, and then bronze, and so on. So he made this great image; and it was all gold. It was his way of saying, 'I'm forever the greatest emperor there is, the greatest king.' And so everyone was to bow down to that image that really represented him. But those three Hebrews would not do it...and as a result they were tossed into a furnace. They suffered for Christ; they suffered for their faith.

But Christ was with them. (I think that's a lesson that we apply to this.) Christ was with them, (and He is with us). But this was a dramatic thing, as you will remember, because Nebuchadnezzar was there and he saw that. He was amazed that they survived the fire and that there was with them a fourth person who was like, he said, "...a son of the gods!". (Dan 3:25). '...son of the gods', or it could be translated, "the Son of God." We think it's Christ—and I think it was.

Now that was a test that proved the three Hebrews were true children of God. And trials do that for us—and that's the reason for rejoicing. We don't rejoice in the suffering itself, but suffering for Christ confirms that we belong to Him, that we belong to Christ.

And our suffering will lead to great rejoicing when Christ returns. Peter wrote, "...also at the revelation of His glory you will rejoice with exaltation." (vs13b). The Lord vindicated those three Hebrews in the fiery furnace—and they were honored as a result.

And the same will be true of us when the Lord returns with His rewards. And the honor that is given at that time will be far greater than anything that has gone before—anything those three Hebrews received...great honor and glory.

Peter then gives a specific example of persecution in verse 14, of being, "...reviled for the name of Christ..." The verb, *reviled*, is a present tense, and suggests,

'continuation over a period of time'. This isn't just one time...a brief moment. Rather this is a pattern that they were going through. And the blessing is also in the present tense as well: "...being reviled for the name of Christ...", is the evidence that, "you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." (vs14b). His presence is constant and strengthens the believers in such times of hardship—and enables them to endure and triumph.

You might wonder, as you consider this and consider all of the terrible things that have happened , (and we'll consider some of those toward the end), 'Could I do that!? Could I be faithful to something as terrifying as the fiery ordeal!? ' And the answer to that is, 'No! Not in your own strength!'

But we don't do anything in our own strength. We have the Spirit of God *upon us*, and, *in us*—and He blesses us with the strength to do that. In fact, He gives us a foretaste of heaven's life and glory. It's a supernatural life that we have, and that enables us to do things that would otherwise be humanly impossible.

So while the future blessing and reward comes when Christ returns, the present blessing is the Holy Spirit's presence with us, and the experience of His life and His ministry in us—making our new life in Christ a supernatural life. Christ lives within us. He was with those three Hebrews; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, in the fiery furnace. And He is with us as well, in an even more profound way. That's especially evident, it would seem Peter was saying, when Christians experience persecution and when they stand firm in it by entrusting themselves to the Lord.

Now in verses 15 and 16, Peter gives a warning about suffering. It is similar to his warning about it back in chapter 2, verse 20, against being 'treated harshly' for personal failures. And here he warned against suffering for sin: "Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer or a thief..." (vs15a). And I can imagine that that might be a problem in the midst of persecution: A man goes through a very difficult time and he might be thinking, 'I'm going to murder that guy...and I can do it in a way that no one knows I did it!'

Or because of privation, you become a thief...steal something. Being deprived of bread, they go out and find a way to secure for themselves. Peter says, "...or an evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;" (vs15b). Now that is a rare word. It means, 'meddling in affairs which are not his or her concern.' And whether it's a time of persecution or not, this is a problem for people, where 'he or she doesn't mind his or her own business.'

Christians don't always suffer for their faith...sometimes they suffer for their foolishness. Gordon Clark, who was a Christian philosopher and theologian, (in fact he spoke here many years ago), wrote an excellent commentary on 1 Peter—and there he wrote, "We are to have a concern for the souls of men, but we are not called upon to meddle in their affairs." And that's true.

The other sins are obvious. If a Christian commits crime, he deserves whatever suffering comes to him—or to her. These aren't the cases of suffering that Peter applauds, or is speaking of in this text, 'so be careful not to bring trouble on yourself', is what he's saying.

It is suffering as a Christian that concerns Peter. He wrote in verse 16, "...but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed..." The world may think it is a shameful thing to suffer as a Christian, but Peter assures us it is not—it is an honor. The world may not think so, but God does—and Christians should think so as well.

It's interesting that Peter uses this word, "Christian"; it is unusual—not to us, but in that time and that age, in the first century, it was unusual. It was a word that was coined by the pagans in Antioch as a disparaging, derisive name for believers. We read of that in Acts chapter 11, verse 26; that's where we learn that the word came out of Antioch by the pagans. It means, "followers of Christ". The only other place it occurs in the Bible is the Book of Acts chapter 26, verse 28, when King Agrippa told Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." So it was used at that time, and probably by the king, no doubt, with a sense of reproach—especially among the Jews, but among the pagans as well.

But Peter said instead of being ashamed of it that they should, "...glorify God in this name." (vs16b). Regardless of the significance, even if it was use disparagingly, the name identified them with Christ as His followers, and as people carrying/bearing His name. So they represented Christ to others; and really, to be associated with the name of Christ was, (and is), an honor—not a disgrace.

Now in verse 17, Peter gave a perspective on the suffering of Christians. He explained to them, 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?" (vs17).

The word, "judgment" here doesn't always mean condemnation. It's broader than that and can also mean judgment that results in good or bad evaluation. It can be judgment that results in approval, or in discipline for a believer. It can also mean condemnation.

And the picture that Peter gives here is of God beginning His judgment with the church—and will later move outside the church and into the world. No one will escape God's judgment. But Christians are being purified and strengthened by it, delivered of sins and drawn close to Christ so that they progress in holiness. That's the purpose of it.

Paul told the Christians in Lystra, in Acts 14, verse 22b, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." That's the life for the church until the Lord comes to establish His kingdom. Peter may have found this principle of judgment, 'beginning with the household of God', in the prophets, where mention is made of judgment coming first to God's people. In Malachi chapter 3, (the last book of the Old Testament), for example, the LORD speaks of coming to His temple and cleansing it with "a refiner's fire", (vs2), and purifying the Levites. In Ezekiel chapter 9, this judgment begins with the temple, and it moves out through Jerusalem.

Edwin Blum called this initial judgment, (or 'refining of the church'), a harbinger of the Lord's judgment to come on the world—'a herald', as it were; an indication of His

future coming. God begins by purifying His people. That judgment goes out from the church to the world from purifying judgment to condemning judgment. So Peter wrote, "...if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (vs17b).

Peter used one of the logical arguments that we often find in the writings of the apostle Paul, (often in the Book of Romans), an argument, 'from the lesser to the greater', to show logically how terrible the judgment will be for the unbeliever. Doom awaits the world, and it is really a moment of sheer terror. God so hates evil that He deals with it by judging His redeemed people. We don't escape that, because He wants us to be pure and holy. So what will be the destiny of unbelievers?... It will be utter destruction.

Peter repeats the 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 the godless man will be destroyed. Paul makes that very point. He makes it very clear in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 6 through 9; "For after all...", he wrote, "...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 the Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

Eternal destruction, eternal death, endless punishment. "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.", the author of Hebrews wrote. (10:31). And that's Peter's meaning here. Judgment will come on the world; the Bible assures us of that. But it is also a fact that "the righteous", as Peter says, are 'saved with difficulty', (vs18), meaning, 'God deals with us in discipline'.

Salvation of the believer is never in doubt—we are eternally secure. Peter made that clear back in chapter 1, verse 5, where he wrote that we, "...are protected by the

power of God..." And we can go throughout the Scriptures and find examples and proof texts for that very thing.

But the Christian life is a serious life. We are God's temple. His presence in us is the greatest blessing. I don't know if you realize that—(and I'm looking within myself as well when I say this), but the reality is...This is the reality! The Third Person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, (who is God, just as the Son is God, and just as the Father is God), that Third Person dwells within the believer! In fact, at the moment of faith we are sealed with the Holy Spirit; and Paul makes that point twice in the Book of Ephesians.

What an amazing thing,
That God dwells within us!
We are His temple!
That is the greatest blessing!

But because we are His temple, He judges His people in order to purify them—just as we see in the Book of Ezekiel that He purifies His temple first. And so we need to be purifying ourselves, if we want to avoid His discipline. Now it comes with the finest of saints. The greatest of the saints were afflicted; but if we want to avoid it, (and we may be 'the lesser'), we need to discipline ourselves; we need to purify ourselves. But again, since we are His temple, we shouldn't be surprised that judgment begins with us.

So what we are to do in such situations when the fiery ordeal is among us? We are given the answer to that: 'We are to do right. We are to trust God'...that's how Peter ends the chapter: "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (vs19).

That really summarizes the teaching of the whole book of 1 Peter. Suffering does not happen by accident; we are not the victims of blind fate. It only happens by the will of God.

Now consider that for a moment—'It occurs by the will of God.' Now at first that seems difficult to understand. In verse 12 Peter said, "...do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal..." But it's very surprising, and surprising to learn that the ordeal is according to God's will. That is for many, a very hard idea to accept. It almost seems like the God, (whom we trust in), is moving the enemy against us...acting as our enemy.

I read a book review, some time ago, of a book written by a woman who cared for a friend rendered quadriplegic. The reviewer wrote, "Both women are infuriated by the idea that suffering serves a purpose." He quoted the author of the book saying, "One would be hard pressed to come up with a spiritual lesson that demands becoming a quadriplegic." Now I'm sympathetic with that; and I'm sure we all are sympathetic with people going through something as terrible as that.

But Christians live by faith, not by sight; and Paul wrote, "...tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character...", (Romans chapter 5, verse 3&4). That is for the Christian.

But, of course, the non-Christian will not understand that. Their happiness is altogether bound up in this world. They give no thought to eternity; it's foolishness to them. However the Christian looks at life, and trials, with eternity on his heart. That is God's work: God is preparing us for that eternity, for what lasts, for eternity and its great reward as a result of how we respond to the trials of life.

Would it be better if your suffering were contrary to God's will? We would still be suffering, only without God controlling the suffering, and without any good purpose, (such as being a faithful witness in severe trials). The fact that suffering is according to God's will, means that He does control it: He controls its intensity and He sets the limits to it—and its means. He gives all of that; it's all in His control.—And not any of it is pointless; it is all for our good.

The enemy, or the disease, is not in control of our life. God controls them, and uses them to sanctify us, causing us to draw close to Him—and forsake sin. We see that in the lives of great men. We see that in the life of Job: God gave Satan permission to afflict him. Now, He set limits on Satan's activities, so He is in control of it—but it was all

according to His will. Satan did it, but it was God who is in control—and for a good purpose.

As a consequence Job, who was a great man, a godly man, grew to be even more so. And at the end of the book, (*of Job*), in the last chapters, Job made statements that indicated that. He replied to the LORD, "I am insignificant." (Job 40:4). "I know You can do all things." (Job 42:2). He praised God for that. He diminished himself and praised God, and he said, "And I repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:6). The affliction refined Job.

And it did the same for Paul. He was given, 'a thorn in the flesh from a messenger of Satan to torment him.' (2Cor 12:7). That was Satan's purpose, to torment him—but God gave it to keep Paul from exalting himself, (and it did just that; it humbled him). He prayed three times that it be removed. God didn't remove it; He didn't answer that prayer; it was according to His will. And by it, Paul learned God's grace—that God's grace was sufficient —and that he was strong when he was weak.

All of that was for Paul's good, and for Job's good. Good comes out of affliction, (it's easy to say this, I know, when things are good and things are pleasant), but it's the teaching of the Word of God. And God never abandons us in it; He always is with us in the darkest hours. And we must believe that, and we must trust Him. He knows what He is doing; we can depend on Him as our faithful Creator. He is sovereign and wise.

Just look at His creation. He cares for it every day. Every day: Feeds the birds, waters the grass, constantly taking care of it. It functions every day. The world around us, the solar system, this galaxy, the entire universe functions according to His will. He takes care of it.

Now if He takes care of it, won't He take care of you? In fact, Jesus made that very point in Matthew 6, (vs26); 'He feeds the birds. —You are more important than the birds...He will take care of you.'

Paul and Job learned to trust Him through affliction. And that's what Peter encouraged the saints to do, (and us), to entrust our souls to Him; commit them to Him. That's what those five young students from Lausanne, Switzerland did when they were

captured and imprisoned in France for preaching the Gospel there. An amazing thing; they go with the Light, they go with the Good News of the Gospel of forgiveness of sins and eternal life...and they're arrested, put in prison, and sentenced to death.

Calvin tried to intervene: He wrote letters to the French authorities pleading for mercy. —That was rejected. He wrote letters to the young men, encouraging them to stand fast. They did that...and it had an effect upon those in prison. One was a highway robber who renounced that wild life that he had lived due to their testimony. They had affected those around them in prison, just as Paul and Silas did in that Philippian jail.

When it was clear that their lives would not be spared, Calvin wrote and encouraged them to prepare themselves by praying that God would let nothing prevent them from following wherever He led them. Each went to his death bravely. As they rode in a cart to the place of execution, they sang Psalm 9 with enthusiasm and joy. When they were told to stop, they called out passages from Scripture to those people who were standing by. When each one was tied to a stake, each stretched his neck to kiss his friend, and each said to the other, "May God keep you, my brother." As the flames went up, they could be heard consoling one another saying, "Courage, brother. Courage." One of their biographers wrote, "Thus died Calvinists."

Why would God allow His church, and young people at that, to suffer such moments of sheer terror? Well, the answer to that is, God knows—and He doesn't reveal it to us. Some day He will. We do know what happened in England when men and women were martyred in that way at Smithfield...it turned public opinion in favor of the Reformation. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." (Tertullian).

And maybe that happened in Rome in Peter's day. If Peter wrote this letter in Rome, as many think he did, then it would have circulated there among the church, (but if it was written in Babylon, it still would have reached there very quickly). His words here would have proved especially applicable, if not prophetic, because the saints of Rome experienced a literal "fiery ordeal."

In the year AD 64, a great fire burned down much of the city of Rome. Many were left homeless and were hostile, (as I recall it was in the 'foresection' of Rome and so they had nothing). The Emperor Nero was suspected of starting it; you may have heard the story that he played his fiddle while Rome burned. But to divert suspicion from him he made a scapegoat of the Christians and blamed them for starting it. That began a great persecution of the church. Christians were killed in the most sadistic ways. Some, Nero had dipped in pitch and made into human torches to light his gardens at night.

We live in very different times. At least we in this country live in very different times, largely very comfortable times. A fiery ordeal of that kind would surprise us. And, of course, none of us desires that....but it may come someday.

The only way to endure such a test and follow willingly wherever God may lead is by His sovereign grace. But even life in the mundane and tame times, such as ours, has its tests: We're not free of sickness; we're not free of ostracism for our faith; and we're always in danger of drifting spiritually due to materialism.

So what we must do, and what will prepare us for the greatest challenges and tests of faith is, know God; know the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

We can't "*entrust* ", (vs19), ourselves to someone that we don't know. Christ knew Him best, knew His Father fully, and on the cross He *entrusted* Himself to His Father. In Luke chapter 23, verse 46, He used this word on the cross. "Father, into Your hands I *commit* My spirit." The same word is here, 'I *entrust* My spirit.'

And faithful to His Son, the Father honored that entrusting. He brought Him through death, and up from the grave to glory. And He will do that for all who entrust their soul to Him. It's an eternal soul; and for the Christian, it is destined for eternal glory. Whatever our suffering here, it is but for a moment. Glory and joy are forever.

But there is suffering that is eternal, that is reserved for the unbeliever. If you're here in unbelief, turn from that and turn in faith, turn to Christ; *entrust* your soul to Him,

the Savior who died for sinners. All who do are forgiven; they escape what Paul called "the penalty of eternal destruction", (2Th 1:9), and are saved forever. That's the Christian's hope— and it can be yours. Look to Christ.

(Closing prayer) What a great assurance that is, Father, that the Savior will hold us fast. "We are in His hand," He explained in John, chapter 10, (vs10). And His hand is in your hand: Can't be dropped; can't be neglected because He bought us, and made us Yours.

We thank You for that security. We thank You for that great love with which You loved us, so much so that He offered Himself up on the cross, to suffer the pains of hell in our place. May we live a life that honors Him in all that we do.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)