

Judgment Begins at Home

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on May the 24th, 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Judgment Begins at Home and is from 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 12 to 19. Heavenly Father, we pray that you'll strengthen us by your word, that we may stand firm in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Over the last few weeks since Easter, we've been preaching through Peter's first letter and you may like to have open in front of you page 986, the second half of 1 Peter 4.

Life is not meant to be easy. Malcolm Fraser told us that 20 years ago. The Christian life is not meant to be easy either.

But sometimes people don't tell us that. Sometimes people declare the Christian faith and encourage people to become Christians under false pretenses.

[1 : 14] The becoming a Christian means that we have a life of some ease or comfort, eternal joy and peace, prosperity, triumph. After all, doesn't the power of the resurrection mean protection for Christians?

Doesn't the power of the gospel mean an end to all opposition? Doesn't the power of the gospel mean an end to all? Doesn't the power of the gospel mean an end to all? Doesn't the power of prayer indicate that we are no longer facing harm? Doesn't the power of faith move strife, if not mountains? Don't be surprised. Peter says, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you.

Don't be surprised. He probably wrote this letter around about 60 AD. Nero was the emperor or soon to become emperor.

Nero was the first Roman emperor who instigated official persecution against Christians. But even before then, there'd been local persecution.

[2 : 27] 49 AD, Christians along with Jews were expelled from Rome. Peter says, don't be surprised. Christians are not immune from persecution.

Indeed, they might almost expect it. Why not be surprised? Peter gives two reasons in this chapter. The first is that persecution is a test from God. Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. My father's a metallurgist and if he were here, he'd explain better than I that the image behind these words is to do with a refiner's fire where metal is poured into a furnace and heated to a high temperature and the rubbish is consumed and some bits will float to the top.

But what is left in essence is pure metal. That's the image that Peter's using here. The fiery ordeal is like a refiner's fire purifying Christian people.

[3 : 41] It fits with the emphasis of the letter on Christians living impeccable lives, being done with sin or doing away with sin as though our failures, our sins are the dross that is being consumed in the refiner's fire and what is left are Christians living lives of righteousness.

God is refining Christian people, Peter says. So don't be surprised at facing persecution. It's God's test to refine you, to purify you, to bring you to lives of righteousness.

He's already announced that way back at the beginning of the letter. Chapter 1 verse 6. In this you rejoice in the salvation that is yours through Jesus' resurrection. In this you rejoice even if for now, a little while, you have had to suffer various trials.

Why? So that the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold, that though perishable is tested by fire, so that the genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Notice that it's this refiner's fire is not an attack on weak faith. It is an attack on false faith or the absence of faith.

[4 : 59] Those who claim to have faith but do not. It is to prove the genuineness of faith. So even a person with weak faith but nonetheless genuine faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, even that person will find their faith being strengthened and purified.

So for those that have weak faith, don't be afraid of this fiery ordeal. It is to prove your faith, to show that it is genuine, if weak. That's alright. And to strengthen and purify it.

But it is an attack, it is a destruction on those who do not have faith or those who claim to have faith but do not have faith. This refining fire will consume the dross but purify real faith, whether it's weak or strong.

Christian faith, you see, is strengthened and purified under attack, under trial, in the face of affliction or difficulty.

That's the same today. Though I don't want to belittle the situation of Peter's letter which deals with persecution rather than general trials and difficulties of this life, the principle nonetheless stands firm.

[6 : 18] that it's under affliction and difficulty and trial, even attack, the Christian faith is strengthened and grows and is refined. Some of you will have heard of Malcolm Muggeridge, a journalist, British journalist of this century.

He was a skeptic for many years, became a Christian in his later years. Late in his life he wrote, contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful.

I now look back upon them with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness.

The Bible from beginning to end warns us more about the dangers of wealth and ease and prosperity than it does about the dangers of affliction or trial or want.

There are implications here for how we respond to persecution but to other trials as well. It's easy to pray for a quick resolution, to pray for the job when we're unemployed or healing when we're sick and so on.

[7 : 52] But God uses afflictions, trials and certainly persecution to refine and purify and grow faith. God don't be and God is refining and testing your faith.

The second reason he gives for not being surprised is because when we face persecution we share in Christ's sufferings.

not in the sense of Christ's sufferings bring us atonement and somehow we can participate in that but rather because we're a follower of a suffering Christ we are called also to suffer like him.

He said to us to take up our cross and follow him. Don't be surprised Peter says because Christians follow a suffering Christ therefore we ought to expect to suffer and to suffer persecution as he did.

Don't think that we're exempt because Christ has already suffered for us but rather we are to follow him in suffering persecution.

[9 : 08] If the nature of the world in which we live is a world which fundamentally is opposed to God and Jesus Christ then it is a world that will be opposed to those who bear the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says if the world hates you know that it hated me first. He said that to his disciples before he died. So if Jesus bore the persecution of a dark world then those who follow him can expect to bear the same persecution.

Given this passage's expectation that Christians face opposition and persecution our surprise ought to be not when we face it but why are we not?

Our surprise ought to be the fact that we today in Australia in 1998 do not face persecution for being Christians by and large. Little bits here and there yes definitely but why aren't we bearing persecution?

persecution the Bible seems to expect so much persecution against the people of God we ought to ask the question why don't we? Could it be that our lives are not taking Christ seriously enough?

[10 : 30] Could it be that the lack of persecution is because of the lack of evidence of Christ in the lives of Christians in the modern church in Australia? Could it be that it should suggest a lack of conformity to Christ?

If the world is fundamentally opposed to Christ as it is then maybe this is saying something of warning to us about the complacency of our lives that we're more conformed to the world than to Jesus Christ.

Another possibility exists maybe the world's changed since Jesus day maybe it's not true that the world is fundamentally opposed to God and Jesus Christ.

And certainly we live in an era where there is residual Christian remnants of thinking and priorities and morality in modern Australia. But it's diminishing and I think it's diminishing fast.

Less and less are Christian principles and faith the model for leaders and decision makers in our society. More and more overtly are there those who oppose Christian faith in our society.

[11 : 52] Peter says we are to live as aliens and strangers in the world. That means not being conformed to the world but being conformed to Christ. And it means that we must expect persecution which I suspect will grow in this country in the decades to come.

Don't be surprised he says. Persecution is a test to purify you. Persecution is a sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

It's a demonstration that we belong to him. over recent weeks we found in 1 Peter the emphasis on hope. Hope that begins through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And that continues here as well. For Peter saying if we share in Christ's sufferings now then we can have a sure hope of sharing in his glory to come. So verse 13 says sharing in Christ's sufferings now is an indication a sure sign of sharing in his glory when he comes again.

Verse 14 if you are reviled for the name of Christ you are blessed because the spirit of glory which is the spirit of God is resting on you.

[13 : 21] To be reviled in the ancient world was significant. To be shamed or humiliated in the ancient world was a great disgrace. Compare that to our society where we revile each other mockingly as signs of affection in Australia.

But then to lose face was serious. But Peter says even if you lose face even if you were reviled even if you are humiliated and mocked don't be ashamed.

but know that the spirit of God's glory rests upon you. It's a strange expression. It's a bit hard to translate but it's virtually the same as an expression in the Old Testament that talks about the Messiah in Isaiah 11.

That the Messiah is the one on whom the spirit of God's glory rests. So if for him the Messiah so too Peter says for the Messiah's people for Christian people the Holy Spirit here is a guarantee of future glory.

It is the spirit of God's glory resting on you now. It is God's deposit. It's his guarantee. It's saying to you who are suffering persecution God is with you. Glory in the future is guaranteed.

[14 : 36] Here's a deposit. Here's a guarantee of the future glory that will be yours when Jesus is revealed. That's the role and function of the Holy Spirit in this verse. Future glory is certain because the spirit of God's glory rests upon you now.

And what an encouragement that is in the face of a fiery ordeal to have God's spirit resting bringing calm and stability and peace now on you.

Verse 16 similar idea yet if any of you suffer as a Christian do not consider it disgrace but glorify God because you bear this name.

In our society it's still not all that bad to be called a Christian or to call yourself a Christian but for Peter's day it was a term of a little mild mock or a bit of a derogatory term a Christian.

Peter says don't be ashamed of bearing that name but rather glorify God that you do. Praise God that you are identified with Jesus Christ when you face persecution.

[15 : 53] But notice Peter's warning here. Make sure that if you're suffering abuse reviling persecution opposition make sure that it's because of Jesus Christ that you do so not because of your own stupidity or hard heartedness or ill judged character or your own crimes.

Make sure that you're not facing opposition or abuse because you're a murderer or a thief or a common criminal he says in verse 15 or somebody who meddles in somebody else's business. Make sure that it's for the name of Christ that you bear opposition and persecution.

Test your motives test your character be careful to see what's attracting opposition. Sometimes in the world Christians seem to be on a sort of self-martyr type program where they try and exercise character that is so strange and unlikable that they inevitably attract opposition and think that it's because of the name of Christ but it's really because of their own stupidity.

Make sure that any opposition and persecution you bear is because of Christ not yourself. But even more than hoping for God's glory Christians are to rejoice but rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's suffering so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

Notice that it's not to rejoice in the sufferings as though oh yes I'm really enjoying this persecution and punishment that's masochism and stupidity but rather rejoice that the sufferings you face are sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

[17:27] Peter says rejoice now so that at the end your joy may bubble over. The word moves from joy now to inexpressible joy at the time when Jesus returns unutterable joy joy that is bubbling and flowing over at the end times and the joy that we have now is a little foretaste of that end time joy that is abundant beyond imagination.

Joy is not a smiley happy-go-lucky type feeling. The person who for any difficulty in this life says oh isn't this nice and so on joy but rather a joy that is deep seated at the center of their being.

A joy that is confident in the resurrection of Christ and the sovereignty of God. A joy that knows that God's purposes will be fulfilled at the end of time when Jesus returns. A joy that knows that present afflictions and trials are temporary and transient but in the eternal scale of things there is abundant joy with God in heaven awaiting.

That's the Christian joy that we're called to. A joy that lasts whatever is going on in this world. Jesus we're told for the joy that was set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and that's the joy that is to be ours as well.

In October on October the 16th 1555 a day I'm sure you all remember very well. Bishops Latimer and Ridley were burned at the stake when Mary was Queen of England in the Catholic Reformation.

[19:10] They were reviled publicly humiliated stripped of being bishop and priest stripped of their clothes apart from just an under tunic and then literally faced a fiery ordeal burned at the stake a horrible death because the wood was slightly wet and the fire was slow to take hold.

Latimer said to Ridley in words that are quite famous be of good cheer master Ridley for today we shall light such a candle as will never be put out in England.

Be of good cheer not to be cheerful and bubbly and smile and think it's all very nice thank you but to have a great confident joy in God even in the midst of that trial and they testified to God they refused to recount their faith in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ they expressed their hope in the glory of God that would be set alight in the country of Britain through their deaths that's the sort of joy that Peter says Christians ought to have under persecution now but it's just a little foretaste of the abundant joy that is to come Peter takes a step back in verse 17 and sees a slightly bigger picture he says for the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God last week's passage he said the end is near now he's saying the time has begun for judgment

Peter is saying in effect that persecution is a sign of the end times that is the time between the resurrection and ascension of Christ and his coming again and in all of that period in which we of course live persecution can be expected and is a sign of the end coming and persecution begins with the household of God literally the house of God or the temple of God Peter is using ideas from the Old Testament again as he seems to do in every second verse in this letter in Ezekiel chapter 9 Ezekiel is given a vision of the judgment of God on Jerusalem the temple is about to be destroyed and the city is about to be destroyed and in the vision that Ezekiel has he sees the very heart the sanctuary of the temple where the altar is and afar under the altar is and God sends out a man to bring judgment on the city and coals burning coals from the altar are taken to destroy the city judgment you see beginning from the temple from the house of

God itself but before that judgment goes out a messenger from God goes out and marks everybody who is faithful to God in the midst of this idolatrous city and even though the judgment goes out and is fierce and the city destroyed those who keep calling on the name of the Lord are preserved and saved in the context of the vision in Ezekiel God's glory then lifts from the temple and departs away from the city and away from the temple now Peter's using that imagery in describing what's going on for his readers he said the spirit of God's glory rests on you it hasn't departed as it did for Jerusalem under Ezekiel's vision but if it rests on you it's like the mark that the messenger of God has put on those to preserve them so in the fiery ordeal the Christians are here facing the spirit of God's glory resting on them is a reassurance of their preservation under that ordeal it's a sign of confidence in God's salvation even in the face of judgment which begins with the house of

[23:12] God but for Peter there's no temple the house of God is a spiritual house God's people as he's already said in chapter 2 being built together the final judgment for which this is the beginning will come on the day when Jesus returns and if this fiery ordeal is so hard for Christians to endure and it is it will be even worse for those who are not Christians Peter expresses that in the second

half of verse 17 he says if it begins with us what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God notice how he contrasts Christians and non-Christians here it's not the good and the bad it's not as though our goodness is going to be the mark that preserves us in this fiery ordeal but rather it's those who do not obey the gospel that is the gospel commands us to repent it's those who haven't repented compared to Christians who are those who have so it's not a good bad distinction it's whether we've repented and been forgiven or not and then he quotes Proverbs 11 it is hard for the righteous to be saved what will become of the ungodly and the sinners and he leaves the question unanswered for he dares not explain their outcome therefore let those suffering in accordance with

God's will entrust themselves to a faithful creator while continuing to do good two things remain trust and obey entrust yourselves to a faithful creator to a creator because he's powerful to save faithful because he's reliable to save we can trust somebody who is faithful and reliable so entrust yourselves to a faithful creator powerful and able to save you even from a fiery ordeal like this the same word entrust is used by Jesus himself on the cross when he dies and commits himself and his soul to God's care Paul uses a similar sort of idea in 2 Timothy he says I'm not ashamed for I know the one in whom I have put my trust and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him entrust yourselves to a faithful creator and do right do good continue to do good continue to obey the precepts of

God continue to repent of your sins notice that never does Peter suggest that Christians should seek persecution that's stupidity rather we should seek Christ and persecution may be a consequence it's also good advice here for how to pray for people being persecuted and there are many Christians around the world being persecuted today pray that they may entrust themselves to a faithful creator and continue to do good in the face of their persecution if we ever face persecution it's our trinitarian God who will sustain us because it's the expectation of future glory from a suffering saviour that will sustain us it's the assurance of present glory from God's spirit resting on us that will sustain us and it's the glorifying of a faithful creator that will sustain us us

Isaiah address this sort of issue with these words do not fear for I have redeemed you I have called you by name you are mine when you pass through the waters I will be with you and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you for I am the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel your Saviour do not fear for I am with you you whom I created for my glory who is called by my name whom I formed and made the hymn writer put it like this when through fiery trials your pathway shall lie his grace all sufficient shall be your supply the flame shall not hurt you his only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine the soul that on

Jesus still leans for repose he will not he cannot desert to its foes that soul though all hell should endeavour to shake he never will leave he will never forsake therefore let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful creator while continuing to do good Amen