

May 4, 2008
Easter 7

"During Fiery Trials Cast Your Cares on the Lord"

1 PETER 4:12-16, 5:6-11

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹ Peter ^{5:6} Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. ⁸ Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. ¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Look outside and notice how the hills have turned from bright green to yellow and even brown as the grass withers and dries. Already there was a major fire in the LA area near Pasadena. If you live in California you are not surprised know when fires come because the rains stop falling and the grass and brush on the hills becomes very dry.

Peter tells the scattered Christians in the Roman Empire that they should not be surprised if fires come to them, fiery trials because of their faith. Already some Christians had been burnt to death, thrown to wild beasts in the arenas and driven from their homes and jobs because of the persecution under Nero. That should surprise anyone who knows the words of Jesus in Matthew 24, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."

That's the bad news. Fiery trials have come to Christians just like the firestorms come to California at certain times of the year. Here is the good news. The Lord knows what we are going through, whether it is persecution, pain or discouragement. And we have the privilege of casting our cares and concerns on him, because he truly loves us and cares for us.

The trials will come

Listen again to what Peter says about fiery trials. "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." He says don't be surprised! We like good surprises such as the stimulus deposit that comes

into your bank account or arrives by check in the mail. Or how about the surprise phone call from an old friend, or the surprise birthday celebration your family gave to you. Then there are the bad surprises such as the green fluid leaking from your car, or the friends getting a divorce, or the terrorists' attack on September 11. We should not be caught by surprise when we suffer fiery trials for the name of Jesus. These fiery trials are totally predictable for people who bear the name of Christian. People hated Jesus and they will hate the people who follow Jesus and love his words.

Instead of being surprised when fiery trials come, Peter encourages the Christians facing pain and persecution to rejoice. "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." These words remind us of what Jesus said in the famous Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Christians who suffer fiery trials for the name of Jesus rejoice daily in the hope of glory that is waiting for them. They wake up every morning hoping and praying that Jesus will return and take them to the place he has prepared for us. They cannot wait to hear him speak as he does in Matthew 25 when he says, "Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

We don't want to have to suffer as Christians because we do bad things. "If you suffer it should not be as murderer, or thief or any kind of criminal or even as a meddler." If you kill someone, or steal someone's money or sell drugs, you cannot complain about the suffering you may experience because you are spending time in jail. Peter even adds the problem of meddling in other people's affairs. You have heard the saying, "Mind your own business." People who enjoy meddling in the affairs of others risk losing friends and even being disliked by others. The suffering that comes from doing bad does not bring glory to the name of Jesus. It brings shame on the name of Jesus when Christians do not live up to what Jesus has done for them.

In contrast bring shame on Jesus, how beautiful it is when Christians suffer for the name of Jesus, thereby glorify Christ, and point other people to the blessings they have in him. Peter says "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." Christians who suffer fiery trials for Jesus should not be ashamed of what they are going through for the name of Jesus. Jesus said if we want to follow him we should deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. That is an honor that draws attention to Christ and helps others come to believe in him. "We bear about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ."

I have in my hand a little book called "Persecutor." It is the personal account of a Russian named Sergei who took great joy in persecuting Christians as a successful young communist KGB thug. He relished breaking up prayer meetings and cracking a few skulls with his night stick. One night he broke up a meeting and hit a 16 year old girl along the side of the head with his bare fist, and sent her sprawling across the room. The next week he broke up another meeting and saw the same girl there with a black eye and large bruise on the side of her head where he had hit her. What haunted him every night after that were her

eyes that looked at him, not eyes of hatred but of love. It led him to secretly start reading the Bible and he became a believer. Her suffering for Jesus brought glory to Jesus name and led Sergei to believe.

How important is it that people believe in Jesus? Peter reminds us, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" The Lord will let fiery trials, and even problems and troubles come to us to purify us and help us get rid of sin in our lives. If God is that concerned about purity and holiness, what will happen to the poor people who want nothing to do with Jesus on the day of judgment? Suddenly we realize how important our lives are on this earth are and why fiery trials can actually serve to help other people see Christ through us.

The Lord is always there

Yes, fiery trials will come, but what a blessing it is to know that the Lord is always there for us in midst of the worst trials of life, the lowest moments and the greatest discouragements. Peter writes for all of us, "Humble yourselves, therefore under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." How many times have you heard yourself or others say, "It is in the hands of the Lord." This is not just some pious wish or expression. This is rock solid concrete reality in the life of every Christian. We love to sing the hymn "Eagle's Wings" because it says that he will hold me in the palm of his hand. How often don't we toss and turn as we take things into our hands and needlessly worry and fret about tomorrow. But then we turn it all over to the Lord and place ourselves into his loving arms. What peace and comfort comes when we humbly place ourselves into the hands of the Lord instead of trying to do it all on our own.

The hand of the Lord is a mighty hand. This past week in our Thursday morning Bible study of Isaiah 63 we read a verse where the Lord reminded his people how he used his mighty hand to deliver them from the Egyptians by taking them through the waters of the Red Sea. Do we ever grow tired and weary of hearing how the Lord miraculously took them through those deep waters and even let them walk on dry ground? Recently someone shared an article where archaeologists have found remnants of Egyptian chariots beneath the waters of the sea. Look at the nail prints in the hands of Jesus.

Peter encourages us to cast all of our cares on the Lord. If you have your personal Bible with you this morning, you might want to underline this verse that reads. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Notice it does not say cast some of your anxiety on him, and keep a few for yourself. What does it say, "Cast all your anxiety."

How do you know for sure the Lord really cares for you? Check out Romans 5 with the words, "But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us." He cares for us at the highest level. He sent his own Son to die for us. This past week Sergeant Merlin German died, a 22 year old US soldier called the "Miracle Marine" because of burn wounds suffered over 90% of his body about three years ago. He finally succumbed to the pain wounds. Jesus suffered so much more, the torments of hell itself for our sins. That is the supreme evidence that we can cast all our cares on him. He cares for us.

The devil never wants us to cast our cares on the Lord, or humble ourselves under his mighty helping hand. He encourages us to fret and worry needlessly until we become so overwhelmed with feeling sorry for ourselves that we lose sight of our blessings in Jesus. Satan is no little kitty cat that has sharp claws that scratch you. Peter, who once gave into Satan and denied Jesus, warns us, "Be self controlled and alert. Your enemy the evil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." The Greek word for "devour" combines the word "Drink" with an intense prefix to change the mean to gulp down or swallow completely. Give the devil an inch and he takes, not just a foot, but the whole ruler. Peter encourages us to resist him. "Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings." You see these Christians sitting next to you this morning, the Christians in India, and England and Argentina. All over the world they are going to war with you against Satan and his minions of evil spirits. We are fighting against spiritual wickedness in high places.

What a privilege it is to end this sermon today about fiery trials that come to us with these comforting words. "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the glory forever and ever." God of all grace has called you to his eternal glory. He gave you this gift. He has given you eternal glory in Christ. Your suffering is only for a little while compared to the glory waiting for you. He will restore you, a word used to describe fishermen mending broken nets on the sea of Galilee. He will make you strong, firm and steadfast. For that we give him all the glory and the honor. Fiery trials will come but the Lord is always with us. Amen.