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The Firestorms Are Coming!

Servival Kit, Part 5

1 Peter 4:12-13

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

The Christian life is not a life that seeks safety at all costs. The Christian life can be marked by suffering and danger because it is submitting to anything and everything that God asks. Over and over again, Peter reminds his audience that suffering is a normal thing for Christians. Suffering should not sneak up on you so that you are surprised by it. Suffering is not unique to you either. You shouldn't view your suffering as different than someone else's. We all go through trials, but Peter urges his audience to continue rejoicing even in the midst of the firestorm because it brings us a special fellowship with Jesus because of how he suffered.

Discussion Points:

Peter has made it abundantly clear in his letter that a Christian will not be exempt from suffering in many forms. In 1 Peter 4:12 he starts by telling his audience to not be surprised by trials but refers to trials in a unique way.

- How does Peter describe these trials in verse 12?
- What do you imagine a fiery trial to look?
- How does this description affect your understanding of the severity of trials Peter is referring to?
- What are different ways that fire changes an object?
- Is this fire that Peter is referring to one of destruction, refining, or does its function depend on the person being tested?
- How does your mindset and attitude help determine the way the fiery trial shapes you?

Discussion Guide cont.

Peter reminds his listeners not to think it strange that they are in the midst of trials. So many times we are too focused on ourselves that we do not recognize the ways that other people suffer. We can be so selfishly focused that we forget to care about others.

- What does it mean to not think of your trial as being strange?
- How does serving others connect with the idea to not see your own trial as strange?
- Peter says not to think of your testing as strange, but how do you do that practically?
- How can you keep yourself from comparing your trials with others'?
- How can you make sure to use your trials to grow and refine you instead of being scared of it?

Suffering is not fun. It is difficult to endure through. Peter knows this and, by the time he wrote this letter, he has suffered in many ways. The way he encourages others to endure is by reminding them of the suffering of Christ.

- Why is it important to remember the suffering of Christ?
- Can we follow Christ's example in our own lives if we never suffer?
- What does it mean to share in the sufferings of Christ?
- How does this sharing and fellowship with Christ's sufferings give us reason to have hope?

Peter says to keep rejoicing even when in the midst of a difficult trial.

- Does Peter say to rejoice because of the trial or is he saying that you should rejoice even in that circumstance?
- Does Peter downplay the difficulty of trials in our lives by telling us to rejoice?
- What are we supposed to rejoice about?
- What future hope does Peter say we should rejoice in?

Gospel Connection:

Suffering is a normal aspect of the life of a Christian. Jesus himself lived a life full of suffering in every way imaginable. Suffering can come as a consequence of sin, but Jesus never sinned. When he experienced trials in his life, he did not shake them off and say they are nothing. He did not downplay their difficulty. Instead, he endured through them by looking to the hope he had with God the Father and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. We are not without those same objects of hope. And we even have Jesus' example to follow. He is our Great High Priest who can sympathize with all of our weaknesses because he experienced them as well (Hebrews 4:15). When Jesus came to die on the cross, he did not fast forward time until he had paid the penalty for our sin. He endured through years of discomfort and troubles for our sake. His love for us was so great that he endured everything imaginable so that we could one day have fellowship with him, not only in his sufferings, but also one day in the revelation of his glory that will last forever.

Discussion Guide cont.

Practical Implications:

- Think:** Are you going through a fiery ordeal right now? When one comes, will you be surprised by it? What will you do to focus your attention on Christ so that you can rejoice?
- Pray:** Ask God to continue encouraging you through the tough times. Thank Him for Jesus who can sympathize with everything we experience and who can give us comfort because he understands what we are going through.
- Do:** Examine your heart to see if you are too focused on yourself. Look for ways to serve others. Encourage and comfort others you see who are going through trials.

The Firestorms Are Coming!

Survival Kit, Part 5

1 Peter 4:12-13

In his book *The Colors of Hope*, Richard Dahlstrom describes what he calls the “safety first mentality” which has seized the American public. According to this perspective, “the key to living well is living safely.”

Dahlstrom writes: “Lock your doors at night. Get an alarm system. Save 10 percent and make sure your investment is insured . . . Take your vitamins, minerals, omega-3s, ginkgo bilboa, and St. John's Wort. Eat lots of soluble fibers. Exercise. Get eight hours of sleep . . . Go to church regularly . . . Don't go on mission trips to places where you might contract staph infection, malaria, intestinal parasites, or face a terrorist plot.” So don't do any risky hobbies. “Eat organic. Get a colonoscopy.”

And you're thinking – I'll do it! Except for that last thing. The word colonoscopy is never found in the Bible.

“Okay,” Dahlstrom writes, “so you're safe now, right? Not really.” He referred to an extraordinary athlete and specimen of fine health, who died at the age of forty while shooting hoops. He ate right, exercised and didn't smoke or drink - ever. Never mind that the oldest woman on record, Jeanne Calment, who died at the age of 122, stopped smoking at the age of 117 only because her eyesight was so bad she couldn't light her cigarettes.”

The moral of this story is not to start smoking; the point is, a safety approach to life is wrong on several levels.

That may be a popular way of living, but the life we're to live is never defined by Jesus Christ in terms of length or health or comfort.

Jesus actually says that those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives – giving them over to the glory of God – will find them (Luke 17:33).¹

Now that doesn't mean we shouldn't take care of ourselves. We should. The older I get the more cautious I get about what I eat. I am under a growing conviction that you should limit Krispy Kreme doughnuts to once a day.

Trying to cover all the bases, attempting to build every safety net around your life to protect yourself from suffering and pain and difficulty, is misguided.

And it isn't a new concept, by the way.

In fact, nearly 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to his friend in which he said, “The art of life is the avoiding of pain.”ⁱⁱ

That might sound intelligent, but biblically speaking, it couldn't be further from the truth. Beloved, the art of life is not *avoiding* suffering; the art of life is learning how to *respond*.

Just think about your first experience with something painful. It actually happened very early in life. In fact, you don't even remember it.

Listen to the way Philip Yancey described it:

“Your world is dark, safe and secure. You are bathed in a warm liquid, cushioned from shock. You do nothing for yourself; you are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that something larger than you fills all your needs. What a fine life it is.

“Then, one day you feel a tug . . . then another . . . stronger . . . harder. The walls seem to be falling in on you. Those soft cushions are now pulsating and beating against you, crushing you – pushing you downwards. Your body is bent in half, your limbs twisted and wrenched. You're falling, upside down. And for the first time in your life, you feel pain. There is more pressure, almost too intense to bear. Your head is being squeezed and you are pushed harder, harder. The pain; the noise; the pressure; you hurt all over.

“You begin to hear the faint sounds of crying and groaning . . . louder and louder. And an awful fear rushes in on you. Your world is collapsing. You're sure it's the end of whatever there is. But then you see a piercing, blinding light. Rough hands pull at you . . . everything suddenly grows bright and cold . . . and then, you feel a painful slap . . . you respond with a cry of anguish while everyone around you begins to laugh and cheer.

“Congratulations . . . you have just been born.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Your life, after birth, began with suffering. And it’s not over. And that’s not all there is. While every human being on the planet experiences similar avenues of suffering – disease, financial hard times, disappointments and loss – the believer is to expect an additional layer of suffering, even more intense.

According to a news release I read this past week, I found it interesting that Americans traveling to North Korea were encouraged to first, draft their will and make funeral plans with family members before leaving the United States.

Imagine living with that kind of expectation – that the world you’re entering has an undercurrent of such hostility and hatred for who you are as a citizen of this country – you’d better have your affairs in order, because you might never come back.

The New Testament actually wants believers to cultivate that kind of expectation. Because you are a citizen of Heaven, get ready to suffer.

The issue for the Christian is never how to protect yourself from persecution – to insulate yourself from suffering – the issue for the Christian is not developing the art of avoiding pain, but developing the art of responding to it.

As the world is hurtling forward in these end times, the Apostle Peter anticipates the suffering of believers to intensify as the hatred of the world for the gospel and for Jesus Christ only intensifies.

For Peter and the first century church, widespread, official persecution in the Roman Empire is just a decade or so away, but the Apostle Peter senses that it’s just around the corner.

And so, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Peter tells us how to prepare, not only for the end of the world as we know it when Jesus comes for the church, but in the meantime, how to respond to suffering in the world.

Turn back in your copy of the New Testament to the *First letter of Peter*. We are in *chapter 4* and at *verse 12*.

Peter gives the believer 3 ways to respond to suffering. First, he commands the Christian to stop being surprised.

Three Ways to Respond to Suffering

1. Stop being surprised by suffering.

Notice *verse 12 of 1 Peter chapter 4* – just the first part;

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for testing. (1 Peter 4:12a)

Don’t be surprised. The original word, *zenizo*, means to be astonished – and not just astonished, but a bewildering astonishment.^{iv} In other words, “This can’t be happening!”

Peter is essentially saying, “Don’t get knocked off your feet – not so much by the fiery ordeal – but by the fact that it came without warning.” It was so unexpected!

And would you notice how Peter counters the normal reaction that we all have as Christians whenever we unexpectedly suffer?

We begin to say things to ourselves like:

- “I wonder if God is aware this is happening to me?”
- “I wonder if I’ve made God mad and He has kicked me out of the Flock.”
- “I wonder if I haven’t been good enough, or disciplined enough, or sinless enough and I don’t deserve anything from now on, but suffering.”

And the Devil waits for these moments of unexpected suffering and sends one of his flaming arrows to your heart and mind that says, “You’re getting what you deserve! Who do you think you are? After all, you don’t deserve God’s love, you deserve God’s wrath.” And here’s his favorite: “*You’re not worthy of God’s love.*”

Let me encourage you to respond to those thoughts by saying, “You’re right; I am unworthy, but I have *always* been unworthy. That hasn’t changed and it never will. But I

belong to the worthy One and because of Him, I am now one of His beloved.”

Let me encourage you to circle the very beginning of this text. Peter isn’t telling people who don’t belong to God that they should expect a bunch of trouble – no, this is to the – **Beloved.**

Okay then, but these must be Christians whom God doesn’t really like as much as other Christians – no, they are **Beloved.**

But these must be Christians who’ve lost their privilege to special treatment from God because they don’t have as much faith as others – or they missed their devotions three days in a row and a couple of Sunday services; no, we are equally, in Christ – at conversion – and it never changes – His **Beloved.**

In fact, there wasn’t anyone more clearly beloved by God the Father than His Son, the Lord Jesus. His ministry opened, remember, with a booming voice from Heaven saying, ***This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. (Matthew 3:17)***

Which is why the disciples’ minds are all blown away when Jesus later announces to them that He is going to suffer.

Mathew records 13 chapters later, ***Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes . . . [and] Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” (Matthew 16:21-22)***

“What do you mean you’re going to suffer? This isn’t how God treats His beloved! God’s children don’t suffer; they prosper.”

You see, Peter never got over that shock to his practical theology!

And he is writing believers to help us anticipate suffering so we won’t be shocked either; and be unprepared for it, which, of course, was a part of why Peter denied the Lord.

Suffering is not an accident – it is an appointment. Well then, if it’s appointed by God and it’s something that beloved Christians should anticipate, then it probably won’t hurt all that much or all that long, right?

Notice Peter’s vocabulary – ***Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing . . .***

That sounds painful and difficult – it is!

Peter nowhere in this letter – and this is the third time he’s referred to suffering – nowhere does he downplay or diminish the impact of any kind of suffering on the heart and mind and life of the believer.^v

He calls it what it is: ***a fiery ordeal.*** You could translate it, “a painful trial, literally, a purification by fire.”^{vi}

We use the same kind of vocabulary today when we talk about someone suffering – they are really going through the fire. The heat is really turned up on them. They’re in the middle of a firestorm.^{vii} That’s the language of the Apostle Peter.

The word Peter uses actually refers to the refiner’s crucible – the refiner’s fire. Notice – this ***comes upon you for your testing.*** That’s the idea behind his use of the image of being tested or purified.

A First Century goldsmith would work at refining the gold ore in his crucible. The only way to separate the gold from unwanted impurities was to turn up the heat and reduce the ore to liquid form. With just the right heat, the impurities would rise to the surface to be skimmed away.

I have read that a skilled goldsmith would continue to add more and more heat to the liquid gold until he could see his reflection on the surface of the liquid. Only then would he know the contents were pure.^{viii}

Even though the world and the devil intend to crush you through suffering, God allows it to construct you.

As one author wrote, “God doesn’t waste our suffering, and neither should we.”^{ix} Like the Lord Jesus, we learn obedience through the things we suffer. (Hebrews 5:8)

So don’t be surprised when the world brings on suffering. And don’t be surprised that God has a purpose for it.

It’s easy to forget that, even though the world and the devil and the enemies of the gospel

seem to throw wood on the fire and do everything they can turn up the heat, Peter is informing us that God is the one controlling the thermostat.

The heat will never get any hotter than He desires, as He burns off the impurities and allows the image of Christ to be seen in and through our lives.

Peter gives us another response of the believer to suffering:

First, don't be surprised by suffering, then secondly;

2. Don't think it's strange when you suffer.

Notice again the text; *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; (1 Peter 4:12)*

Again, Peter is trying to eliminate the shock factor from the believer.

The word translated *strange thing* here is a close cousin to the word he just used for surprise. *Strange thing* gives us our English word *xenophobia*, which means a fear of strangers.^x

In other words, suffering for the believer isn't an encounter with a stranger, so start recognizing it when it shows up. Learn to recognize trials, not as strangers, but as tutors.

The truth is, God often uses firestorms to **straighten us up**; to get our attention; to turn us around; to create an entirely different pursuit in life.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book entitled *The Problem of Pain*, these interesting insights: "I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contentedly fallen condition, absorbed in a merry meeting with my friends, or a bit of work that tickles my vanity, a holiday or a new book, when suddenly a stab of pain threatens a serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction and sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down.

At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happinesses look like broken toys. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart that my true good is in another world and my only real treasure is Christ.

Then, by God's grace, I succeed and for a day or two become a person consciously dependent on God and drawing my strength from the right source.

But the moment the threat is removed, my whole nature leaps back to the toys."^{xi}

How true! How easily we forget the spiritual vision and wisdom we learned in the valley of despair.

So is it any wonder that when suffering regularly knocks on our door that the Apostle Peter wants us to view it, not as a surprising, unwelcome guest, but as a wise tutor to invite in and eagerly learn from?

God uses firestorms to straighten us up. But God also uses firestorms to *stand us up*. Trials don't simply correct you, they construct you. God doesn't intend to destroy your faith, He intends to develop your faith.

This happens to be Paul's approach to pain and pressure in Romans chapter 5. *And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance . . . and proven character . . . and hope. (Romans 5:3-4)*

What an attitude toward tribulation! We're thanking God for it because, instead of destroying us, it begins to develop us.

God wants us standing tall in perseverance and character and hope. Yes Lord, teach me those things! And God effectively says, "Get ready; a trial is going to show up when you least expect it. Don't treat it like a stranger. Welcome it; it's a tutor sent directly from Me."

God uses firestorms to straighten us up and to stand us up; He also uses firestorms to **stir us up**.

That's the final lesson Peter wants to press home.

Don't be surprised by suffering.

Don't think it's strange when you suffer.

Finally,

3. Keep on rejoicing when you suffer.

Notice *verse 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. (1 Peter 4:13)*

And maybe you're thinking, "Okay, it's one thing to try not to be surprised when unexpected suffering shows up and it's another thing to welcome it and learn from it, but now rejoice about it? Now you've gone too far!"

And listen, it looks like he has! Are we supposed to paste on phony smiles and dry our tears and say, "It doesn't really bother me. Besides, God is in control?"

No, Peter has already referred to suffering as painful, fiery ordeals. And he actually wants to take us deeper than simply expecting trials and even welcoming trials.

Rejoicing when you're in the crucible can only happen if you keep in mind Peter's counsel.

Notice how the verse begins. **To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ...**

This is what Greek scholars call an adverb of degree – that is, in so far as you share in the sufferings of Christ.^{xii}

In other words, each believer will suffer differently. There is a degree to which God has designed each Christian to suffer, and only He knows why.

You have your race to run – not mine, not anyone else's. It is your divinely designed race with suffering unique to God's work in your life along the journey.

Which allows us to stop looking at other believers and then accusing God of playing favorites:

- "Why is that Christian healthy, and I'm going into my 7th surgery?"
- "Why is that believer financially blessed and I'm in bankruptcy?"
- "Why was that believer's spouse faithful and mine a deserter?"

- "Why is that couple blessed with children and we're unable to conceive?"
- "Why is that man or woman given an easy highway and mine is filled with one pothole and U-turn after another?"

Peter hints at the reason: God has designed the degree – the measured way in which you and I will share – literally, fellowship – with the sufferings of Christ.

So you can rejoice in the fact that God has mapped out your life. He not only has His hand on the thermostat of your life, but He has worked out the game plan for your life.

By the way, Peter isn't telling you here to rejoice because you're suffering. There isn't anything spiritual about downplaying the pain of suffering; you don't get any merit badges by saying, "Oh Lord, thank you for making all these miserable things happen to me."

No, notice – you're rejoicing in that you are **sharing in the sufferings of Christ** – you are being drawn into a deeper fellowship with your Savior, whose life was marked by suffering, ridicule, hunger, temptation, misunderstanding, accusation, betrayal, rejection and crucifixion.

Notice how Peter also points forward here in the text. When Christ is revealed in all of His glory, you shall rejoice – the tense indicates a great burst of joy that will sweep over us when we see Christ.^{xiii}

Peter adds, we're going to **rejoice with exultation**. That word means, with jubilation. One author writes that we will be bubbling over with shouts of delight.^{xiv}

And your rejoicing has that implication of uniqueness to the degree – in the manner – in which you suffered.

Let me illustrate it this way; many of you know the testimony of Joni Eareckson Tada, paralyzed now for 40 years.

When you walk down those golden streets of Heaven, you're going to be rejoicing about a lot of things, but she's going to be rejoicing uniquely – in addition to a lot of other things – because of the fact that she's *walking*, down those golden streets.

And our deaf brothers and sisters who have this service and sermon signed to them: we're all going to rejoice one day to sing with the redeemed host of Heaven, but they are going to uniquely rejoice in that they actually *hear the singing* of the host of Heaven.

That's what Peter means. Suffering will all exhaust itself and empty out into eternal exultation, jubilation and celebration.

In the meantime, it's going to be your decision, along the way:

- Are you going to be surprised when the firestorm of suffering shows up?
- Are you going to treat it like an unwelcome stranger, or welcome it in as a teacher – a refiner who turns up the

heat and brings you that much closer to reflecting the image of Christ?

- Are you going to rejoice that you get to live *like* Him now while you look forward to living *with* Him one day?

James M. Gray used to say, "Who minds the journey, when the road leads home?" The road leads us home.

Let's close by singing.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 02/04/2018 by Stephen Davey.

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- xii Hiebert, p. 285
- xiii Hiebert, p. 286
- xiv Ibid