

## **Living as a Christian in a Hostile Environment**

### **1 Peter 4:12-19**

#### **Intro**

There are three sayings called the Chinese Curses, they probably didn't originate in China, but that's what their called – at first glance they sound like a blessing, but there's a sting in the tail for each of them. The first is 'may you find what you are looking for' – get consumed by it. The second is 'may you come to the attention of the authorities' (which is enough to send the shivers down your spine) and the third is: 'May you live in interesting times.'

And we certainly live in interesting times. We don't experience anything like the level of persecution the first century Christians Peter was writing to here would face and nothing like what some of our fellow Christians in other parts of the world face. But the times we live in are certainly interesting as within our lifetime we have watched society come adrift from its Judeo-Christian moorings. Just one or two generations ago a Christian lifestyle, a Christian worldview – would have been considered the norm. But now, whilst we may rarely encounter outright, blatant, in your face hostility here in the West, the average person in the street is, at best, increasingly indifferent to the Christian faith. It simply doesn't register on their radar as of any importance to them. And alongside that there is, I think, a growing tendency within the media to portray Christians in a negative light. If there's a Christian character in a soap opera or TV show, he or she is either going to be a narrow-minded bigot, a bible-bashing fundamentalist, a nosy, self-righteous, busybody or an effeminate, dress wearing vicar.

So if I were to ask you 'have you ever encountered any hostility for being a Christian?' it would be zero surprise if some of you said 'yes'. Like the time when you were having a perfectly civil conversation with someone, then it comes up that you're a Christian, and suddenly you have plummeted in their estimation, they thought they were talking to a perfectly rational, intelligent human being, but it turns out that you're not that at all, you're a Christian and they shut down on you as soon as they can. Or you make a decision at work based on integrity: you're a Christian, people know that, and you're not going to cut corners here, this matters, but you get serious grief about that decision from above.

Now, what you and I experience is hardly the fiery trial Peter is talking about here. But shame is shame. Feeling exposed and ridiculed and sidelined are always difficult to swallow. Having your parents or children or friends turn on you because of your faith is always going to be hard.

So how do you deal with that? How should you and I handle ourselves in an increasingly hostile environment? You could give in and give way under peer pressure. Or you could develop a siege mentality. That seems to me to be what many Christians do. They withdraw, they bunker down. At the extremes are communities like the Amish, at the less extreme is withdrawing into our Christian ghettos, never mixing with non-Christians. And from our bunkers we lob grenades at the enemy. We lose sight of the fact that these other people are just as much victims of satan's scheme to blind people to the truth, we increasingly resent them, we see them as enemies and we treat them accordingly.

But Peter has a fundamentally different response in mind.

## **1. Don't be surprised**

Now why does Peter feel it necessary to tell us not to be surprised when we face suffering for the sake of Christ? Because we're tempted to think: hey, this shouldn't be happening to me. I'm trying to live right here, I'm trying to live out what it means to be a Christian, I'm trying to be a good witness for you Lord, I've taken a decision to try and get my life back on track: so why Lord are you allowing these people to get at me like this, why have my family or colleagues turned on me, why when I'm trying to do right, do I just get wrong in return.

But Peter says 'don't be surprised'. This is what it means to be a Christian. And Christ's suffering and rejection and ultimately his execution, tell us that suffering for his sake is going to be a normal part of what it means to follow Him. Jesus said, if they persecuted me, they'll persecute you. So, if you got sold a gospel of 'come to Jesus and everything will go well with you' I'm afraid you got sold a duffer. Peter says, 'sorry guys, this is normal'.

And in v12 he describes this stuff that comes our way as fiery trials that come upon us to test us. Proverbs 27:21 says: 'The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise'. That just like the crucible and the furnace do their work to get rid of the impurities in silver and gold, testing it, working on it, bringing the impurities up to the surface, so praise does the same thing in our hearts. Praise tests a man or a woman who receives it. You think praise is pleasant, no, it's a test: do you take the glory for yourself, does it puff you up, does your head swell? Or when you get praised do you know where the glory and the praise really belong? You start of thinking praise is kind of cool, but what you discover is it's furnace hot, and God uses it to expose stuff and get rid of stuff in your heart like a furnace does with gold, proverbs says. And Peter is saying 'Hostility –the opposite of praise - works just the same way.' There are times God uses hostility to deal with and refine our characters, our reactions, what really matters to us. Is what others think of me more important, or what God thinks of me? Is my security down here or is it in Him? Am I living for His commendation or their commendation? Is Christ most precious to me, or is their opinion of me of greater value?

So, the gospel isn't 'come to Jesus and everything will turn to gold', its come to Jesus and there will be times when you will be tested with fire like gold, to see what metal you're made of.

But then in v15 Peter throws in a warning, it's a check to stop us getting carried away into a martyr mentality, and it is just as important now as it was then. 'But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.' You see you can face hostility, Peter says, for a whole load of reasons other than being faithful to Jesus. You can bring suffering on your own head by doing stupid things. Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean every time you face some opposition it's because you're a Christian. It might just be because you get up other people's noses.

I knew a guy who was always complaining that other people had it in for him. And he went from one job to the next because he would repeatedly get into trouble and get fired. And he would blame it on everyone else who had a vendetta against him. The thing is, you didn't have to spend long in his company to realize who had the problem. And, Peter starts way off out here with 'don't suffer as a murderer' well that's not something that's too much of a problem round these parts, unless you count eating meat as murder, but given the price of steak in Switzerland we can't even be found guilty for that. But step-by-step Peter brings it closer to home. Don't suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or a meddler.

Now meddling, that's interesting, because there's a fine line between wanting to be involved in others lives for your needs rather than the other person's, between wanting to care and meddling, between prayer and gossip. And maybe Peter's heard that some of them have been picking over others' lives, interfering in families or marriages in a way that is neither helpful or welcome. Or maybe Peter's aiming at clumsy, tactless attempts at converting people. Whatever was going on, Peter's saying look it's possible to draw down fire on yourself and face hostility as a Christian but it's got nothing to do with Jesus Christ; it's got to do with you rubbing people up the wrong way.

So if you're in the situation of incoming fire coming your way, it's worth just taking a step back and assessing, ok, what am I actually facing hostility for? Is it for the gospel, or is it for my abrasive personality? Is it for the gospel or is it for stuff like political views or harsh attitudes unflavored with love that can stick to the gospel like barnacles to the bottom of the ship? Now don't get me wrong, the gospel has profound implications for politics and the public square. But Peter's advice is: if you're under fire, make sure it's because of the gospel and the cause of Jesus Christ and not for meddling.

So Peter says 'don't suffer for wrong stuff, but don't be surprised when you do suffer for what's right.'

## **2. But rejoice:**

And instead of being surprised in v13 Peter says we should 'rejoice in sofar as you share Christ's suffering' and he gives us two good reasons why he can say that.

### **a. What you experience now is just a foretaste of coming joy**

He doesn't suggest you and I should rejoice because we enjoy suffering. Peter's not a masochist. There was a time a while back, at least in the UK, when it was popular to say something like 'o what we need is some persecution, because that would purify the church and unleash God's power again' as if we'd all enjoy it: O, there's nothing better than the smell of saints burning at the stake!' But that's not what Peter's talking about here. My physics teacher Mike Gouldstone first told me about Jesus and Mike was just a wonderful evangelist and my friends and I would listen to Mike talking about Jesus and he just intrigued us. And I remember asking Mike in a physics lesson, before I became a Christian, if he would be prepared to die for his faith – sort of morbid question a 16 year old asks, and Mike replied yes, he hoped he could say that, but he'd like it to be as painless as

possible. And I thought what a great answer! And Peter says rejoice insofar as you share Christ's suffering, not because you enjoy pain, but so that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Listen Peter says, you can rejoice now when you get stuck for being a Christian, when you come under fire for making godly decisions, because this life is just a foretaste of the joy you will experience when Christ's glory is revealed in the next life. If your gaze, if your sight is fixed on the present, you will struggle to find any joy in being ridiculed or sidelined, but if you look to what is to come, there's great joy.

Well, you might think, that's all well and good, that's out there, in the future, but what about here and now? What resources can I draw on to help me fight with joy in the battle now?

### **b. Those who are insulted are blessed – God's Spirit is present**

Well Peter gives a second reason why you can rejoice: those who are insulted are blessed. V14: If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

The Christian who faces insults for Christ's sake – whose family turns on them, whose friends mock them, may not feel it, but the truth is he or she is blessed Peter says and not because there is something wonderfully character forming about being insulted, not because a bit of suffering is good for your soul, but because God's Spirit, the Spirit of glory, rests upon them, and especially so when they stand up for Christ.

And the truth is that you can allow hostility and opposition and insults to leave you just a bit mean-spirited and embittered against those who treat you like that. It can shrivel your spirit. But Peter offers a different response and that is to drink deep of the Holy Spirit. The commentators agree that Peter has in mind here Is 11 where Isaiah talks about the Spirit that's going to rest on the Messiah: There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall *rest upon him*, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And now, Peter says that same Spirit doesn't just rest upon the Messiah but upon all those who are Christ's and in special measure on those who are prepared to face suffering in His name.

And it's only through the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit that you and I can find the strength and the stamina to live *with* joy and *without* compromise when we're under fire.

So Peter says in v16, if it's given to you to suffer for being a Christian, that's not your shame, don't be ashamed of that: it's your glory: the pain and the glory of being a follower of Jesus. And you can glorify God by responding to that pain *with* joy and *in* the Holy Spirit.

So Peter says don't be surprised but find joy in the things you suffer for Christ. And then, he tells them that it is time for judgment to begin at the house of God.

### **3. Judgment begins at the house of God.**

V17: For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Now you might think: Whoa! Where's the encouragement in what I'm going through being judgment from God? I thought I was already saved. I thought becoming a Christian spared me from judgment. I thought that now I'm in Christ He's paid for my sins and I'm counted righteous in Him. What's this about judgment beginning at the house of God?

Well, Peter isn't talking about insults and persecutions being judgment as in punishment from God. The wonderful truth of the gospel is that through faith in Jesus Christ we are transferred from the domain of darkness and into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, our sins are no longer counted to us, but we're counted righteous in Jesus, so there is no sin left to be punished for, it's already been punished in Jesus.

Peter's talking about something else. He's talking about the judgment of God that sifts out those who truly believe and those who don't. When Jesus talked about this He used the picture of a shepherd sorting out the sheep from the goats, a farmer sorting out the wheat from the weeds. That's the judgment of God. And Peter is saying that when suffering comes on the house of God, it is the end-time judgment of God breaking into our time and beginning to sift out. God begins the process of judging the nations and He begins with His people. And hostility is one means by which God tests and sorts people out. Persecution sorts out those who are truly Christ's and those who aren't. That's why the apostle John says in 1 John 2:18-19 'We know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.'

Judgment, Peter says, begins with the household of God. And the Christian who chooses to embrace suffering for Christ's sake, and embrace the shame and the pain, in joy and the Holy Spirit, rather than ditch and abandon the faith is already experiencing the judgment that everyone will one day face, separating God's people from those who reject Him. And those who stick with it, through the pain and the shame are already being shown to be true sheep of the Shepherd. They are already undergoing that test.

Well, that's pretty sobering. And you might think, 'how can I know I'll come through the test, how can I know that if I ever have to face a furnace like trial that I'm going to come out like gold?' Well, Peter answers just that and we will finish with it.

### **4. Entrust yourself to God and continue to do good**

V19: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good."

And that verse just about sums up the whole of 1 Peter. Sometimes you will go through periods of adversity and trial and suffering, not by accident, not because God was caught off guard, not because something happens and God says 'oops I didn't see that coming' but by His will.

That doesn't mean you seek suffering and persecution out. You don't seek it out, but neither do you seek to avoid it all costs either. You just keep doing what's right regardless of the cost.

And Peter says when times like that come your way entrust your souls to a faithful Creator. Your ability to stand and to come through a time of opposition does not rest upon you, it rests in Him. It's not dependent on your faithfulness, but on His, it doesn't hang on your ability to hold onto Him, it hangs on His ability to hold on to you and He will never let you go.

Now why do you think Peter specifically calls God the Creator here? Why not entrust your souls to a faithful Father, or Saviour. Why to a faithful Creator? Well just consider what God the Creator already holds together. Just consider the stars and the galaxies, and the scope of His power and authority. Then it bring it down to earth and consider the animals and flowers, right down to the structures of the cell, all designed by His wisdom and overseen by His keeping and the sustaining power. And then realize that He is more than capable of looking after you if you will entrust yourself to Him. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground Jesus said, unless God says so and you are worth much more than sparrows.

So when things start getting hot for you, at work, or in your family, or at school and you start getting flack for Christ, entrust yourself, hand your self over to his faithful care, Peter says, and then he adds 'while doing good'. Because the danger is that when living and speaking like a Christian gets you into trouble, and making changes to your life to bring your life into line with God's word draws incoming fire down onto you, the danger is that you're tempted to quieten things down a bit. 'No', Peter says 'don't stop living like you should.' And don't turn inwards, focusing on your troubles, keep looking outwards, that you might do good and be a blessing to others.

Don't be surprised, rejoice, entrust yourself to Him and keep on doing good.