The Crucible of Suffering
1 Peter 4:12-19

We're approaching the end of Peter's first letter. As we do, Peter returns to a subject he's talked about repeatedly: suffering. Suffering for being a Christian - which his friends were experiencing. And you might experience the same. Or different. You know the well-worn comment by Benjamin Franklin that only two things in life are certain, 'death and taxes', but what about suffering? As Don Carson the American theologian wrote, 'All you have to do is live long enough, and you'll suffer.' Now, sure, somewhere you could probably find someone who's glided through life untroubled by sorrow, but I doubt they're here. And all of us can experience times we wish we didn't, maybe even times when we wish life was over. And what Peter says here is relevant for all that kind of suffering too.

I once heard a pastor say that the job of a pastor is to prepare his people for suffering. And in his book on suffering, 'How Long, O Lord?' Don Carson writes 'This is a book of preventive medicine.' He goes on, 'we do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves *until* we ourselves are confronted with tragedy.' But when that happens, if our thinking about suffering or God are faulty, Carson says, 'the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over.' In other words, you've got to get your thinking about suffering right *before* you go through it.

Which is why Peter writes this. It's preventive medicine. But hopefully healing medicine too.

So, four things. 1. What your suffering is. 2. Why you're suffering. 3. How to suffer well. 4. Why you should embrace it.

What Your Suffering Is
Verse 12, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the *fiery trial* when it comes upon you.' And those two words, *fiery trial,* are translating one Greek word, *pyrosis - the act of burning.* So, don't be surprised, Peter says, when you're going through something that feels like everything is being burnt up around you, and it feels like you're experiencing a trial by fire.

And for them, they're suffering *because* of their Christian faith: v14, 'If you are insulted for the name of Christ…'. Verse16, 'If anyone suffers as a Christian…' But it's not limited to that. Look at v19: 'Let those who suffer *according to God's will*…' So any time you do what's right and it costs you, any time you're facing grief or loss of whatever you've lost, any time life is hard and God is allowing it to happen, you're in a fiery trial, Peter says.

Where's he getting that image from? Well, what do you think of when you hear that word *pyrosis*, Pyrotechnics and fireworks, or pyromaniac and burning stuff down? - because they come from this word. But Peter's got a different type of fire in mind. Look back at chapter 1: 'You have been grieved by various trials, so that *the tested genuineness of your faith - more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire*…' (1 Peter 1:6-7).

And once again, Peter's taking us back into the goldsmith's and silversmith's workshop, and saying 'look at the craftsman as he applies the fire to the metal. As he melts the metal in the crucible. *That's* what you're going through.' When you suffer *because* you're a Christian or *as* a Christian, you're going through a purifying fire.

So, it's not just that you didn't get that job. It's not just that your paper got rejected or that person you were interested in turned you down. It's not just that you're facing difficult decisions at work or

a medical diagnosis you didn't want to hear. Your suffering *is* all that, but it's more. It's an act of burning, like the silversmith purifying silver.

Why would God put you through that?

Why You're Suffering
Verse 12 again, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you *to test you*.' So suffering's a test. But not a pass or fail test. A test of what you're made of, of what matters most to you, of what your identity or significance is built on, of what you're trusting in.

You see, these guys are facing criticism and insults from family and friends because of their faith. Why is that a test? Because like fire melts the silver and brings impurities to the surface, so suffering brings to the surface what matters most to them: their reputation or Christ? Or maybe you feel overlooked at work, or badly treated by your supervisor, or a friend has hurt you deeply, and it's getting to you. How is that a test? Because what your identity is rooted in is also being brought to the surface. Or maybe you're single and someone who's not a Christian is interested in you, and you're interested, but know you shouldn't be, and it hurts. How is that a test? Because the heat is revealing the mixture that's in your heart - the good and the bad, the silver and the impurities - of how you trust that God and his ways and his word are good, but also you don't because wouldn't this relationship be better?

And so suffering's a test because it exposes what I really think about life, where my hope and security really lie, where I get my identity from. And it's purifying because in the heat things separate out and becomes clear, what's gold and what's dross. What's the silver to be kept and the impurities to be removed.

But not all suffering is like that. Verse 15, 'But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.' And while it's not obvious in English, in the original Peter groups the first three - murderer, thief and evildoer - together, but has the last one - being a meddler, out on its own. Why? Because they're unlikely to suffer as murderers, thieves or evildoers - and neither are you. Though, if you try to kill someone's reputation at work, or rob their work through plagiarism, you can bring trouble on your own head. But being a meddler, that's a bit closer to home.

And maybe some of them were facing insults, not because of loyalty to Christ, but because *they'd* been a bit insulting - too quick to point out the sins of their non-Christian neighbours. Or by being a busybody. Or in their enthusiasm to convert people, crossed over some social boundaries.

Whatever it is, Peter's point is, if you're going to suffer, make sure your only crime is that you're a Christian. Because you can't get a speeding ticket and go 'just taken one for Christ.' You haven't.

And yet, even suffering we've brought on ourselves, if we let it do its work of sifting and separating, can have a purifying effect on our lives, because it can force us to question, 'why did I do that?' And so the fire of suffering has a way of exposing our idols: the things we're looking to instead of God for comfort, security, pleasure or just feeling ok about ourselves.

And it's because that's what suffering is and does that Peter says, 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?' So he's looking down the line of history to the Final Judgment. And he's saying, for us, for the household of God, that judgment has already begun.

Now, you might hear that and go, 'but I thought, if we're Christians, we aren't going to be judged. Doesn't Paul say there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?' Absolutely. If you're a Christian, at the Last Judgment you will be declared not guilty. Because the Last Judgment will be a time of separating out: those who trust Jesus and are in Christ, from those who don't and aren't. But it'll also be a time of separation of us from our sin, us from our idols, us from all our impurities. A time when we'll be told, you can leave that at the door - you won't be needing that here. Because just like you get areas signed 'Smoke Free Zones', so the New Heavens and the New Earth will be a Sin Free Zone.

And Peter's saying, that Final Judgment work of purifying, sorting, and sifting in our lives has already begun. And it can be painful and feel like you're in a crucible of fire, so what will it be like in eternity for those who reject him Christ and aren't in him? Verse 18, "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" And the answer is, you don't want to know.

But what you do want to know is, how can I come through trials in better shape than I went in, not least so I can be a better witness to those who don't believe?

How to Suffer Well

Because not everyone does, do they? Someone can face a period of suffering and become embittered, and their faith becomes an empty shell, or they turn away from faith altogether. While others go through some fire and come out shining like silver, and their faith is stronger and they're more humble and grateful and people watching go, 'I wish I had her faith and her joy.' What makes the difference?

Well, Peter highlights 6 attitudes that might explain it.

Number 1. Know who you are. Verse 12, 'Beloved'. That's who you are. That's who they were to Peter, and it's who they and you are to God. It's your identity.

But when the temperature in your life is going up, and it feels like your reputation or relationship, or job or health are going up in smoke, you can question - does God really love me? And Peter's saying, 'yes, he loves you, and it's precisely because you are beloved that he lets purifying trials come.'

And the writer to the Hebrews explains why. But he switches the metaphor from being in the fire, to being a parent. Which if you're a parent probably feels like the same thing! Hebrews 12:6-11 'The Lord disciplines the one he loves… he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.'

Now, anyone with an ounce of common sense knows, if a parent really loves their child, they're going to discipline him. Or in our case, hers. And our girls used to complain, because we were strict. No sweets, no TV, in bed by 6, and immediate obedience. It was like growing up in a Soviet Gulag. But now, they go, 'oh if I have kids I'm totally going to do it the same way. I'm going to rule

them with a rod of iron.' What made the difference? Serving in Sunday school! Looking after your kids! That's a joke, but there's nothing like a bit of real-world experience to tell you, if you want kids to flourish they need boundaries and discipline. And attitudes and behaviours have to be confronted and changed… for their good. And the writer to the Hebrews is saying, And the Lord uses hard things in our lives so that we grow in Christlikeness. And he does it, because he loves us.

But notice something else about being loved. Because when he calls them, 'Beloved' (v12), it's plural. He's talking to them as a church, as a family, as a community. And when you're in the fire, it can feel very lonely. And Peter's saying, but we're beloved together. So don't withdraw. Be a part of a beloved community that suffers well together.

Because you're not just beloved, you also belong. Verse 16, 'If anyone suffers *as a Christian*….' And that name *Christian* was coined as a sarcastic term by those opposed to these early believers. But then they went and adopted it as a badge of honour - because it said, we're Christ's. And so are you. And whether you suffer *because* you're a Christian, or *as* a Christian, you're a Christian, you belong to him and he will never let you go, however hot things get.

Number 2. Don't be surprised. Verse 12, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you.' But we can be, can't we. The heat starts going up, fires start breaking out, and we can think, 'this should not be happening.' And you're right - life should *not* be like this. But when you express that, you're expressing a longing for Eden, and the world to be put right. A longing that secular atheism has no explanation for, because *why* shouldn't the world be like this? But that Christianity doesn't just explain but promises will one day be fulfilled.

But that surprise at suffering might also be expressing something a little less positive - a mistaken view of the the nature and purpose of suffering - that it's for punishment not purification. 'And this should not be happening to me because God shouldn't be punishing me. I've been good. I've gone to church, I've been kind to people, I've given to good causes. I've kept my side of the bargain - but God… well, it surprises me that he would treat me this way.'

But the gospel tells us that Christ has already taken all the punishment we deserve. So I don't need to be surprised when suffering comes, because it's not punishment, so I don't need to become bitter or filled with doubt that some unconfessed sin has brought this upon me.

Instead…

Number 3: Rejoice. Verse13, 'But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.'

Are you really supposed to rejoice when your doctor tells you the worst, or your boyfriend's left you, or your company announces it's closing the office? No. He's saying that when you suffer you're sharing in the same arc of life as Jesus. Because with Jesus it was death then resurrection, suffering then glory. And so, if you're a Christian and you're suffering now, you can rejoice because you know glory is coming.

And 'suffering first, glory second' is woven through Jesus' teaching: you've got to lose yourself to find yourself; you have to die to live; you have to give up to keep. And the first shall be last, but the last shall be first.

It's why Paul said of Jesus, 'He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore God has highly exalted him*.' (Phil 2:8-9). It's why the writer to the Hebrews says, 'For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, *and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*' (Heb 12:2). Because with Jesus, it's always suffering first, then glory.

So, when you find yourself walking the same path as Jesus, and you're suffering, take heart - glory's coming.

Number 4: Don't hide from suffering. Verse 16, 'If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be *ashamed*…' Shame is a powerful motivation for wrong behaviour, isn't it. They're being mocked for being Christians. What do you feel when you're on the receiving end of that? Shame. You want to be liked, well thought of, in the in-group, and instead, you're being shamed. And the way out is… Keep quiet about your faith. Hide. And Peter's saying, 'Don't'. Verse 16, 'let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in that name.'

But of course, you don't have to suffer explicitly because you're a Christian to feel shame. It could be shame over your sin, shame over abuse you've suffered in the past, shame over your current situation - and in shame you withdraw and hide. And not just from others, but from the work the Lord wants to do on your heart though this suffering. So, if you're suffering and shame's involved, remember who you are, beloved Christian. You're beloved and you belong. You're loved by him and owned by him. So allow him to use this pain to deal with what's underneath.

Number 5: Avoid comfort sins. What's your go to when you're stressed? Chocolate? Alcohol? Sex? Or just blobbing in front of the TV (the black box of satan!)? And when you're in the crucible, the danger is you look for comfort, for a way out, a way to dampen the flames, in the wrong places. It's another reason Peter lists those sins in v15, 'Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.' Sure you're not going to murder, but when you're being criticised, it can feel good to attack back. Or you're hurting and anger becomes a problem. And sure you're not a thief, but your losses, or debts are mounting, and there's this source of others' money that you have access to. Or, drinking that glass of wine, or two, or three after a hard day isn't evildoing, until it leads to it.

And so, if you want to come out of the test shining, watch out for comfort sins. You think they're water to dampen the flames, and you discover they're petrol and now you have a whole load of other problems to contend with.

Finally, **Number 6: Entrust yourself.** A couple of months back, I had to have a very minor procedure on my foot. But as the doctor was examining me, I kept on pulling back, because it was painful. Was that helping him? No. Was it helping me? No. So what did I have to do? Put myself in his hands and trust him.

Look at v19, 'Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.' So to come out the other side having grown, you need to understand that God has a plan for what you're going through. That he's sovereign even over your suffering. Now, it's easy to believe that God is on his throne when life is good and the ground you're standing on is solid. But what about when the ground's shaking? Because then, if you think 'this can't be God's will for my

life', that means either he didn't see this coming, which means he doesn't see how it's going to end. Or, he didn't have the power to stop it, in which case he doesn't have the power to help you. Neither of which is any foundation to stand on when your life is shaking. But when you know that he is in sovereign control of everything, even the sins done against you, and he doesn't let anything happen to you outside of his loving fatherly purpose, you can entrust yourself to him and stand the test.

Ok, but then look what he says, 'entrust their [your] souls to *a faithful Creator.*' It's the only time the title *Creator* is used for God in the New Testament. So why use it? Because in the midst of suffering you can know that God is your Creator. He made you, and knows you; knows how you're wired; knows where you're strong and where you're weak; and knows how much you can carry.

Plus, he knows how to use this suffering to shape and mould you for his glory and your good. Because just like a silversmith heats the metal to craft and create something beautiful, so does God. And that means, you're in the safe and faithful hands of a master craftsman. So trust those hands.

But to know how to suffer well is not the same as wanting to it, is it?

Why You Should Embrace It

And in danger of being repetitive and inflicting death by sermon points, I want to give you 3 quick-fire reasons why you should let him do the purifying work of suffering in your heart.

Firstly, for the sake of your character. Paul writes, 'We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope' (Rom 5:3-4). But what's character? It's the collection of your virtues and vices. And in the fire of suffering, your vices can be burned up and your virtues purified. And I doubt any of us want to grow old and bitter, while all of us want our character to be growing. So embrace the test of suffering as it separates your virtues from your vices.

Secondly, do it for the sake of joy. You see, real, deep happiness does not come by avoiding all suffering - that just leads to shallowness. Real, deep happiness comes by coming out the other side of suffering refined. With your love and gratitude for Christ deepened. It's why Peter says, v13, 'Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's suffering, *that you may also rejoice* and be glad when his glory is revealed.' Because finding joy in Christ, even in the midst of suffering, puts you on the path to even greater joy now and in eternity. None of us want to be miserable. So let the crucible of suffering burn up the sins that promise you happiness but always let you down.

But thirdly, embrace it because Christ did. And Jesus suffered, not for his sins or to burn off his vices, or expose his idols, but for yours. And at the cross he went through the ultimate fiery trial as the ultimate innocent sufferer. It's why Peter says, 'you share *Christ's* suffering' (v13). And he was cursed so you might be loved, he was disowned so you might be owned, cast out so you might be brought in, thrown into the fire so you might come through it.

No one else worships a God who suffered. But you do, and he suffered for you. So see his love for you and it'll be like a light shining in the darkness. Back in chapter 2, Peter said that in his suffering, Jesus 'continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly' (2:23). Why should you do that? Because Jesus did it, and he did it for you.