

LEAN INTO THE FIRE

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A
STRANGE LAND



Catalog No. 20201122
1 Peter 4:12-19
11th Message
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November 22, 2020

1 Peter 4:12-19

This week is Thanksgiving week! If you are a college student, you are acutely aware of this, especially if you are a Stanford student because you just finished your quarter! Congratulations, and I hope you are ready to enjoy an extra-long winter break.

If you didn't realize that it is Thanksgiving week, I'm sure you realized that this is Black Friday week. If your email inbox looks anything like mine, every company that you have ever ordered anything from wants to make sure that you know that it is Black Friday week—or is it Black Friday month now?

I have a prediction for Black Friday this year. My prediction is that consumers are going to spend more money this year on Black Friday/Cyber Monday/Cyber Week sales than ever before. I don't think I am going out on a limb here. I'll tell you my reasoning in a moment, but first I want to do a little poll. I want to ask you about your Black Friday plans this year. So here are three questions:

1. Have you already purchased something in a Black Friday sale this year?
2. Do you plan to purchase anything in a Black Friday sale this year?
3. Do you anticipate spending more this year on Black Friday sales than you do in a typical year?

While you are answering those questions, let me explain the reasoning behind my prediction. This year, we have a combination of factors that drive people to spend money on things they don't need (as much as we would like to convince ourselves that we *need* a robot to vacuum our house, we don't). We are hurting. We are tired. And we are bored—so bored! That is the perfect combination of feelings to convince us that we need Alexa in every room and a new 4k big screen TV to boot.

That's my prediction. Let's see what you think. Based on your answers, it looks like most of you are

not planning to spend more this year than you do in a typical year. Let's hope you are right. Prove me wrong!

As we continue our study of 1 Peter in this series called "Flourish," we are going to find some truths that undermine the lie that sits behind every marketing email in your inbox right now. That lie is that buying more stuff is going to fix your problems. Now don't get me wrong. Buying stuff is not evil. Fantastic deals are not evil. But when we place our hope in our stuff, when we believe that our stuff is going to fix our problems—that it is going to bring us joy and excitement and satisfaction—we are going to be sorely disappointed.

So if buying more things isn't the solution to the train wreck that we call 2020, what is? Let's take a look at our passage in 1 Peter to see what God would say.

Fire is coming

Our text for the morning is 1 Peter 4:12-19. Let's start by looking at v. 12.

1 Peter 4:12:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Here, we see that Peter is returning to a theme that he has come back to time and time again throughout this letter: suffering. This is the third or fourth major section that Peter focuses in on the topic of suffering. The reason was simple: his audience was suffering! They were going through it. We know that much of the suffering they were facing was outright persecution because of their faith in Jesus. Not only were Christians in Peter's day social outcasts and rejects, but they were also systematically tortured under Nero—thrown in cages with wild animals while people watched for fun; impaled on spikes, covered in tar, and burned alive as human torches to light the road for passersby's. Terrible, horrific persecution.

What does Peter say to them? *Don't be surprised.* Don't be surprised when the fiery trial comes your way. The word for fiery trial literally means "the burning." It can be used to refer to something that is literally on fire, or it can refer to a kind of suffering that is so intense that it feels as if you are engulfed in flames.

This kind of suffering can come because of persecution, but Peter's words here are not limited to suffering for our faith, though that is the focus. But, earlier in the book, Peter refers to his readers' suffering as "various trials" (1 Peter 1:6) Various means *all kinds, all types, all modes* of suffering.

Don't be surprised. When the cancer comes back, don't be surprised. When you lose your job and can't make rent, don't be surprised. When a global pandemic strikes, don't be surprised.

The other day, I was thinking back to the early days of our quarantine and how little we knew about how to survive a pandemic. Those first few weeks, we were sanitizing every surface like there was no tomorrow while we breathed out our COVID droplets all over each other. I thought to myself, *Man, next time there is a pandemic, we are going to know what's up. We are going to be prepared.* Then I thought, *Oh Lord, I hope we never have to live through another pandemic.*

But if we do, don't be surprised! Don't be surprised when the fiery trial comes to test you. When Peter says test, he is not talking about your final exams. This is a stress test—a test that pushes something to its limit in order to reveal the true character or nature of that thing. More on that in a bit.

The point here is that we ought to expect life to be hard. Everyone suffers. Everyone experiences hardship. Being a Christian does not exempt you from this suffering. Rather, it raises the expectation. Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him. And anyone who tells you differently is trying to run a con. As followers of Jesus, we don't get a pass. We get an extra measure. We get a pandemic, and we get mocked for actually believing the Bible. We struggle with mental health, and we get judged for our sexual ethic that is at such great odds with the culture around us. Following Jesus doesn't mean that we are exempt from the fiery trial. Instead, it often means that the fire gets even hotter.

So, what do we do when the fire comes? You know what we are tempted to do? Go Black Friday shopping.

Binge-watch *Tiger King*. Drink. Watch porn. Do anything to distract us from the pain and the boredom.

But that doesn't work, does it? Well, it does for a little while—that's why we do it. But then it leaves us feeling more empty, more anxious, and more lonely.

The answer is not to numb the pain or run from the fire. Rather, the answer is to lean in. Lean into the fire. Lean into our suffering. Recognize our suffering for what it is—not a sign that the world is spinning out of control, but an opportunity—an opportunity to mature as people, as followers of Jesus, an opportunity to experience greater intimacy with God that we have ever known before, and an opportunity to bring glory to God.

So what does it look like to lean into our sufferings? Let's come back to our passage to find out.

Learning to rejoice

1 Peter 4:13:

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

First, Peter tells us to expect suffering. Now he wants us to rejoice in our suffering? We enjoy the suffering?

No. We don't enjoy the suffering. We don't seek the suffering. We don't pray for cancer. But when it comes, we rejoice. How is this possible? In order to rejoice in our sufferings, we must find something (besides the pain itself) that is worth rejoicing in—some positive outcome that is being produced by our pain. Peter points to two such outcomes.

First, our suffering is an opportunity to experience greater intimacy with Jesus. When we suffer, we do not suffer alone. We share in the suffering of Jesus, our faithful Friend and compassionate Companion in our time of need. Jesus knows what it is like to suffer, and he promises to be with us in the midst of our suffering as we share in his suffering. Suffering produces intimacy with Jesus.

The second positive outcome of our suffering is that it reminds us of the future glory that is waiting for us when Jesus returns. Friends, suffering sits at the very center of the gospel. It is through the suffering of Christ—particularly his suffering on the cross—that he paid

the price for our sins. It is through his suffering on the cross that Jesus defeated the powers of sin and evil that would love to see us suffer in hell forever apart from our loving God. It is because Jesus suffered for us—because he died for us—and then rose from the dead that we have confidence that we will not suffer forever! Jesus is coming back in glory. He is bringing healing, justice, and wholeness—all of which is possible because he suffered.

Suffering is not the enemy of God. Suffering is the tool through which God is saving the world.

And so we rejoice. We rejoice in your suffering as you cling to Jesus. Let your suffering drive you deeper into relationship with him as you learn to depend on him in new and profound ways. Let your suffering remind you of what Jesus accomplished for you through his suffering. At that, we can rejoice.

Don't run from the fire. Don't blame God for it. Rejoice in it and cling to Jesus. Hold on tight to him and don't let go.

In April of this year, the Pew Research Group conducted a study in which they asked Christians how the COVID-19 crisis had impacted their faith. Specifically, their question was "As a result of the coronavirus outbreak, my faith has become: (1) stronger, (2) hasn't changed much or (3) weaker." Before I reveal the results, I want to pitch a similar question to you. Instead of asking how your faith has been impacted by the pandemic, I want to hear how your faith has been impacted by 2020 and all of the hardship that has come along with it.

While you're answering that question, let me share a little bit about my answer. I would say, without a doubt, my faith has become stronger through this season. There are a lot of factors and experiences that have played into that, but all of them have to do with suffering—both suffering in my own life and in my immediate family as well as the pain and suffering that many of you have shared with me. Loved ones sick with COVID or other illnesses, some of whom have passed away. Jobs that have been lost or work situations that have gotten worse. Loneliness. Isolation. Mental health breakdowns. We have all been affected by all of this to some degree. In the midst of all of this, I have had to depend on Jesus more than ever before, and he has shown up time after time. I have more trust and confidence in the grace, love, and power of God than ever before.

That's my story. Let's hear your story. Based on your answers, it looks like 52% of you feel that your faith has become stronger this year, while 7% feel that it has become weaker.

Back in April, when the Pew Research Group conducted this study, nearly all churches were still closed and meeting exclusively online. Everything was shut down and the markets were still in turmoil. Twenty-three million Americans were unemployed. Still, in spite of that, they found that 35% of Christians and 42% of evangelicals said that their faith has *grown stronger* during the pandemic. Only 5% of Christians and 2% of evangelicals said that their faith had become weaker.¹

Suffering is not the enemy of God, nor is it our enemy. Suffering is the tool by which Jesus is saving the world, and it is an opportunity for us to grow in faith and in intimacy with Jesus. And so we lean into our suffering and we rejoice.

Perseverance and the glory of God

As Peter continues, he wants to clarify what kind of suffering.

1 Peter 4:14-15:

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

Let's be clear, Peter says. Not all suffering is equal in the sight of God. If your coworkers don't like you, you have to ask yourself, *Is it because I'm a Christian or because I'm mean*. There is a difference between being a Christian and suffering, and suffering because you are a Christian. This is exactly what Peter says in the next few verses.

1 Peter 4:16:

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

The term "Christian" is not a common title for followers of Jesus in the New Testament. It only appears three times, including here. The other two references are in Acts (11:26; 26:28), where we learn that the term

“Christian” was coined by the gentiles as a derogatory term for those who gave their allegiance to Jesus instead of the emperor.

When people mock you because you follow Jesus, Peter says, don't be ashamed. You may or may not have experienced much suffering, specifically because of your faith. But, as our culture becomes increasingly more secular, and as it moves further and further away from its Judeo-Christian worldview and moral underpinnings, we can expect that this will happen more and more. Christianity is increasingly pushed to the margins of our culture. When you are mocked because of your faith, don't be ashamed. Don't be surprised, and don't be ashamed.

Instead, glorify God in your suffering. To glorify God is to make much of him, or to magnify him. Think of a telescope. A telescope helps us look at something massive but also a long ways away. It makes that object look closer than it does to our naked eye. This is what our suffering does. Our suffering becomes a telescope that helps a world which is far from God see him more clearly. It makes him larger, more visible to people as they watch us suffer.

How? How does our suffering have this magnifying effect?

Peter goes on to explain this in the next two verses.

1 Peter 4:17-18:

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? 18 And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

The opportunity that we have to glorify God through our suffering is related to the judgment that is coming. This may sound a bit odd, but it makes perfect sense as we dig in a little bit. Peter says that judgment begins with the household of God. It starts with those who identify themselves as Christians, as followers of Jesus. When Peter speaks of judgment here but doesn't mean punishment, as if the suffering we may experience as Christians is God punishing us for our sins. Rather, he speaks of judgment as the act of separating the real from the fake. Think of a judge who uses scales to weight two metals to determine which was is genuine and which one is a fraud.

This is the effect that suffering has on us. When those of us who self-identify as Christians suffer, the suffering reveals our true identity. Suffering causes some people to turn from God, to deny Jesus, to abandon ship. *This is not what I signed up for!* And they run the other direction. John tells us that these people were never true followers of Jesus when he says, “They went out from us because they were not of us” (1 John 2:19).

But the true disciple, the genuine believer, the authentic Christian reveals their true identity by sticking with Jesus through the suffering. Perseverance becomes the test of genuine faith. Perseverance is the marker of the true disciple. This is why Peter said back in verse 12 that the fire comes to test us. Suffering is the stress test that reveals our true identity. Genuine followers of Jesus persevere, and those who are just dabbling in Jesus run the other direction.

Perseverance is not easy, though. It is hard! If we are going to persevere, we must remind ourselves of what we know is coming in the future, both for those who stick with Jesus and for those who abandon him. On the one hand, we recognize the future that awaits those who don't persevere—the ungodly, or those who don't obey the gospel of God, as Peter says. Those who chose to reject Jesus and walk in their own way will suffer for all of eternity in hell apart from the loving presence of God. The fiery trials that we may experience in this life, as brutal and miserable and painful as they may be, are nothing compared to the fires of hell.

But on the other hand, we recognize, as Paul says in Romans 8:18, that our present sufferings are *not worth comparing* to the future glory that is waiting for us when Jesus returns. In other words, Jesus is so beautiful, so wonderful, so glorious that nothing is better than being with him and nothing is worse than being apart from him!

When the fire comes into your life, don't run. Rather, persevere through your suffering for the glory of God. Allow your suffering to become the telescope that helps the world get a close-up view of God's goodness and his beauty.

When my wife and I lived in Chicago, we became good friends with a couple who was about 20 years older than us. This couple came alongside us to mentor and encourage us as we were preparing for ministry. During our time there, the wife, Tonya, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was about 50 years old, and the cancer

was pretty advanced. She began treatment immediately, but it was incredibly hard on her. Our community came around her and prayed for her, and God answered our prayers. Through the treatment of her excellent medical team and the hand of God, Tonya beat cancer. We were all overjoyed!

Two years ago, about four years after the cancer disappeared, it returned. This time, the cancer had spread. It was everywhere. Tonya is still undergoing treatment, but she is not doing well.

One evening, Tonya and her husband were at their small group, and they were all sharing ways that they wanted to be more like Jesus. When it was Tonya's turn, she said, "I want to learn to suffer like Jesus did."

Through this incredible trial, Tonya has suffered so well. She has not turned her back on God. She has not run from him. Instead, she has persevered because she knows that she follows a God who has suffered for her. Tonya is a telescope.

Let's be telescopes. Let's push through our suffering so that the world might come to know our great God.

Trusting the God who is faithful

Our passage ends with one final instruction for us.

1 Peter 4:19:

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

I love the title that's used here for God. Don't miss it. Faithful Creator.

Over the past few years, I've started to dabble in woodworking. It started when we first moved to the Bay Area five years ago. We didn't bring much furniture with us from Chicago, and we were trying to furnish and decorate our new home on a budget. One day, my wife showed me a picture of a coffee table on Pinterest and asked, Do you think you can build that? Sure, why not! After the table, it was some shelves. Then another table. Then a TV cabinet. With each new project, I got a few new tools, watched a lot more YouTube videos, and learned new woodworking skills.

Our boys are two and four years old now, so, both of them are done with cribs. My wife recently came to

me with another picture from Pinterest. This time, not of a coffee table, but of a bunk bed. "Do you think you can build that for our boys?"

There is a lot more riding on a bunk bed than a coffee table. If a coffee table falls apart, you spill your coffee and maybe a houseplant. If a bunk bed falls apart, you spill your children, which is much, much worse.

Five years ago, when I was just starting some woodworking, there is a reason that my wife didn't ask me to build bunk beds. We didn't have kids, for starters and we didn't really want to sleep in bunk beds ourselves. But also she had no reason to trust that I could build a bunk bed that wouldn't fall apart. I didn't have a track record. But now that I have built some other furniture, now that I have proven myself as a faithful creator of some other things, she is ready to trust me with the bunk beds and the lives of our children that they will hold.

God is a faithful Creator—not just of a few small things, but of the entire universe. He spoke, and light was created. He breathed, and life began. He keeps the planets spinning. He keeps your heart beating. He is a faithful Creator.

At many points this year, it has felt like life was spinning out of control. And yet God has held it together.

The Creator of the universe is trustworthy. The God who created the heavens and the earth is big enough to fix whatever problems we encounter in this life—whatever hardship we experience. Do you believe that? You should! God has a proven track record.

And so, Peter says, trust God in your suffering. Then he adds another idea: trust God while doing good. Trust God in your suffering while doing good.

Sometimes our suffering has a way of turning our attention inward. We get so fixated on ourselves and our own problems that we stop noticing other people and their problems. We stop caring for people. We stop serving people. We stop loving people well. Don't do that! Don't let your suffering distract you from doing good.

If your suffering is keeping you from loving and serving the people around you, perhaps it's because you are not trusting God. Perhaps you are trying to solve your own problems. Perhaps you are trying to alleviate your own pain. But if you trust God with your problems, it frees you up to notice the problems of others and to step in and help them.

One of the things that scares me most about this pandemic is that the whole world is suffering at the same time. Life is hard for everyone. Because of that, there is a temptation for all of us to worry about our own problems instead of trusting God with our problems so that we can help others with their problems.

I have a friend who stepped down from her job in January. She was pretty burnt out from her last job and wanted to take a little time off before finding a new one. Then, right about the time that she was about to start interviewing, a pandemic broke out, and the job market completely dried up. That was the beginning of several long and discouraging months without work. There were plenty of reasons for my friend to keep her attention on herself and her own struggles until she was able to find a solution. But she didn't do that. Instead, she trusted God and started looking for ways to help others. One of those ways was to start volunteering every week at a food bank, distributing food to people in need. That is so awesome!

In the midst of our shared suffering that is 2020, let's look for ways love and serve others while we trust God to fix all that is wrong in this world and in our lives.

Conclusion

Thanksgiving is four days away, and this is going to be a Thanksgiving unlike any other. We were supposed to be celebrating Thanksgiving with my wife's family on the east coast like we do every year, but those plans got cancelled along with everything else this year.

I'm not sure how you have experienced hardship year, but I know you have. If you want to live a life of flourish, lean into that hardship. Rejoice in your suffering. Let God meet you there. Let God form you there. Let God magnify himself there. Amen.

Endnotes

1 Claire Gecewicz. "Few Americans say their house of worship is open, but a quarter say their faith has grown amid pandemic," *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/>.

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