

# Studies in First Peter

## "Fire Proved"

First Peter 4:12-19

### Introduction

Peter was a firebug. He didn't start any fires that we know of; but he spent a lot of his time talking about fire. Listen for references to fire in these verses from his two letters:

1 Peter 1:7 that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, **though it is tested by fire**, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange **concerning the fiery trial** which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

2 Peter 3:7 But the heavens and the earth *which* are now preserved by the same word, are **reserved for fire** until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, **being on fire**, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?

Reading these verses carefully, you discover that there were at least two fires on Peter's mind:

1. One was the *current* fire of persecution that Christians in all ages endure as strangers in a world that is hostile to Jesus Christ.
2. The other was the *coming* fire of God's final judgment upon the end of the world.

Simply put, he wanted to *encourage* believers to endure their fiery trials and he wanted to *evangelize* the unsaved by letting them know that the fires of God's final judgment were on the prophetic horizon.

There may also have been a personal element in Peter's fascination with fire. Two key episodes in his life revolved around a fire:

1. On the night of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, Peter was challenged by a little girl in a small crowd who identified him as a follower of Jesus. Peter denied it; *he denied his Lord*. The Bible says his denial took place "as he sat by the fire."
2. After Jesus had risen from the grave, He appeared to the disciples on many occasions before ascending into heaven. On one such occasion they were fishing just off shore. He called to them to come and join Him for breakfast. When they came to land to join Him, the Bible says "they saw a fire of coals there." As they dined Jesus had a tender conversation with Peter and commissioned him to go and teach the Word of God.

Peter understood fire. He had been **fire-proved** by Jesus.

Regarding our text, we'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Be Sure You Are Safe In The Refiner's Hands Before The Fire Starts, and #2 Be Sure You Are Saved In The Refiner's House Before The Fire Spreads.

#### #1 Be Sure You Are Safe In The Refiner's Hands Before The Fire Starts

(v12-16)

When Peter compared the persecution of Christians to fire, he had a particular type of fire in mind. In the first chapter of his letter he compared your faith to "gold" that is "tested by fire." He was talking about the controlled fire that a **refiner** of gold uses to *purify* and *purge* the raw ore into something beautiful and useful. The ore must be cast into a mold and heated to 1900 degrees Fahrenheit. As it is heated the impurities within the raw ore rise to the surface and are skimmed-off. The refiner knows all the impurities are gone when the heated gold is mirror-like and he can see in it his reflection.

**Jesus is your Refiner!** Your persecutions are the Refiner's fire. He has control over their heat and their duration. He's looking to see His reflection in your life.

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

It is wonderful to begin discussing your trials by knowing they are both *intended* and *superintended* by God to be a refining process. It takes away the "strangeness" of your trials. Just as the refiner takes raw ore and superheats it, so your Refiner works with the fires of persecution to purify and purge you.

It is likely that Peter had in mind a particular time of persecution that was just about to break-out upon believers. Caesar Nero would burn Rome, then blame it on the Christians. Then he would burn them - *literally!* One of the tortures was to cover Christians with tar and light them on fire - using them as human torches for his garden.

Peter's comments should not be restricted to the first century persecution by Nero. They are relevant to all your sufferings for the sake of being a Christian:

1 Peter 4:13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

We're talking about "sufferings" that come upon you because you are a Christian. For sure, all your various sufferings in life are used by God and can have value. But the sufferings of these verses is what we would call persecution. When persecuted, you can "rejoice" because your enemies are treating you just like they treated your Lord. You are "partaking of Christ's sufferings" means you are suffering for being identified as a Christian. Somebody noticed that you love and serve the Lord; they try to make your life miserable, or take your life. But you are filled with joy at being recognized as His follower. And you will rejoice even more, in the future, when Jesus returns to this earth and His "glory is revealed" for all to see.

That's all good for the future; what about right now, when you are in the fire? Look at verse fourteen:

1 Peter 4:14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed *are you*, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.

"Reproached" is an example of persecution Christians must endure. It refers to all kinds of verbal abuse. When reproached, you are "blessed." It indicates an ongoing blessing. This isn't looking to the future; this is living in the present. In the present you are blessed because "the Spirit of glory rests upon you." This promises a fullness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life to bless, to strengthen, and to give you a foretaste of heaven in the midst of your persecution.

Let me give you an example. I immediately think of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. As the rocks pelted his body, he looked to heaven, saw Jesus, and his face shone with the glory of God. The "Spirit of glory [rested] upon" him. It was certainly true of Stephen and his persecutors that "on their part [Jesus was] blasphemed, but on [his] part [Jesus was] glorified."

Stephen was martyred. Your persecution doesn't need to be as severe in order for you to experience the Holy Spirit resting upon you. In any and every persecution you have the promise of God's presence shining through you. Your Refiner can take you into and through the fire of persecution in ways that glorify Him to your persecutors.

Peter added an important caution in verse fifteen:

1 Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.

There's a difference between suffering for doing what is right as a Christian and suffering for doing wrong. If you bring suffering upon yourself, don't blame it on God, and don't claim it as a blessing.

"Murderer" is kind of strong; were Christians really murdering people? Were they "thieves?" "Evildoers?" Maybe... But here is something more likely. "Evildoers" is a category of people that included "thieves" and "murderers." Under Roman law, these were capital offenses deserving the death penalty. **Believers in Jesus would soon be added to that category by Rome and face the death penalty for their faith!**

When they were included with all the other evildoers who deserved death, they should be certain that they had done nothing deserving death other than the fact they were Christians.

Then Peter mentioned a specific behavior they were to avoid: being "busybodies in other people's matters." There is no agreement among Bible scholars as to what Peter meant exactly. He used a very rare word for busy-bodies. It means something like *looking into men's affairs* coupled with *meddling*. I think - and this is just my uneducated guess - he might have had in mind an exhortation to believers that they not avoid their own persecution by cooperating with Rome against their own brothers and sisters in Christ. They should not avoid suffering by spying for Rome on their fellow believers. Whether that is the meaning or not, it was true that some believers renounced their faith and turned in their fellow Christians.

If that is what Peter had in mind, it fits in with what he said next:

1 Peter 4:16 Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

Believers didn't give themselves the title "Christians." The Romans would call them "Christians," meaning *little Christ's*. It was meant as a reproach; it was a slander, a slur, an insult. It was derogatory. It became more than that: It became a crime. As I said, they amended their death penalty to read "Murderers, thieves, **and Christians!**" Rather than "be ashamed" and renounce the Lord, or their fellow believers, they should "glorify God" when persecuted.

Persecution already existed when Peter wrote. Greater persecution was about to break forth. He was exhorting believers to be sure they were safe in the Refiner's hands before the fire started. He was encouraging them to examine themselves so that the only thing they could be accused of was being Christians. Then, when the fire began, they could rejoice and shine in it and through it.

You and I don't expect "official" government persecution to break-out anytime soon. It could; but it seems far off. Nevertheless you are reproached on a daily basis; there is always unofficial persecution in your life. Examine yourself so that the only thing you can be accused

of is being a little Christ! Then you can rejoice in the Refiner's fire as He works to see His reflection in your life.

Peter was the Church's first evangelist. All this talk about persecution led him to thinking about your persecutors - about their eternal destinies. He had a word for (or at least about) the unsaved, and he gave it in verses seventeen through nineteen.

## #2 Be Sure You Are Saved In The Refiner's House Before The Fire Spreads

(v17-19)

These verses can be scary to believers if taken out of their context. They've been used to teach that you can forfeit eternal life, or lose your salvation.

Let's understand their context. Peter had already said (in verse seven) that "the end of all things is at hand." In other words, we are living in the end times - the last days before the return of Jesus to the earth, and the last days of the earth before God starts over by creating a new heaven and a new earth.

Living in these last days, the unsaved could look upon the Church. God was allowing His own dear saints to be persecuted. As they were put into and through the fires of persecution, their faith was proved; it was revealed to be genuine. They were shining, looking to heaven as they were beaten, stoned, burned at the stake, and torn apart by lions. What they believed was true and powerful. They were "little Christ's," and the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, was empowering them.

What about their unsaved persecutors, who were witnesses of these things? Well, Jesus was coming soon; ***Jesus is coming soon!*** Without faith in Jesus Christ, what hope would the unsaved have? None. As we will read in Second Peter 3:7 and 10,

2 Peter 3:7 But the heavens and the earth... are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:10 ...the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

These last verses of chapter four are **evangelistic**. They invite the unsaved - ***your persecutors*** - to look upon your fiery trial and to consider their own fiery end.

1 Peter 4:17 For the time *has come* for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what will *be* the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

The "judgment" that had begun "at the house of God" is just another way of saying that God was allowing His saints to endure fiery trials. "If it begins with us first" is a reminder that God will also judge the unsaved by fire. Their "end" is coming.

Peter was quoting, or at least referring to, a passage in the Old Testament book of Malachi. There you are told that you will know it is the last days because Jesus will be announced as the Savior and God will begin to refine His people, then judge the unsaved. Let me read a portion of it to you:

Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He *is* like a refiner's fire and like launderers' soap.

Malachi 3:3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness."

Peter, in verse seventeen of his letter, was saying that the time predicted by Malachi was now. The time of refining for God's people had begun; the time of judgment upon the unsaved was inevitable. **The end of all things is at hand**. (By the way - Peter will deal with your scoffing and objections to the return of Jesus in the third chapter of his second letter).

Notice again, in verse seventeen, the real subject on Peter's heart in these closing verses: "What will be the end of those who do not obey

the Gospel of God?" The unsaved were his subject. Concerning the unsaved,

*1 Peter 4:18 Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?"*

This is quoted from Proverbs 11:31. "Scarcely saved" refers to the difficulties God allows in the lives of His saints. It doesn't mean that almost no one is saved; it means the saved must endure the fires of persecution. They are saved by grace through faith; then God proves their faith through their fiery trials while their persecutors look on. The saints look upward, to heaven, and see Jesus standing there waiting to receive them into glory. When they die, they are absent from their bodies and immediately present with their Lord. They will "appear" at His reward seat, to be blessed for eternity.

In contrast, "where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" **Not at the reward seat of Jesus...** But at the Great White Throne judgment.

Peter was warning the unsaved to look at the saints and think about the end of all things - to think about *where* and *how* they would spend eternity.

He tied up his thoughts in verse nineteen:

*1 Peter 4:19 Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.*

Knowing that Jesus is your Refiner... knowing that your persecutions are purifying and purging you, proving your faith... knowing that your persecutors are looking upon you and can get saved through your witness... You can "commit your souls to God." You can trust that you are being kept safe - that your salvation is secure. Your suffering is "according to the will of God," and in it He is "doing good." He can be trusted to be "faithful" while you are in the fire.

Peter called Jesus "Creator." That's because "the end of all things" was on his mind. Once they end, there will follow a new creation. Only those who have trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior will be there.



Be sure that you are saved, a member of God's household of faith, before the fire of God's judgment spreads.

## Conclusion

At one of our Church leadership meetings God gave us a vision to ponder. The vision was of a large bellows pushing air over a circular flame. If the bellows filled and emptied too quickly, the fire was inconsistent and ineffective. If the bellows worked too slowly, the fire died for lack of oxygen. When it operated on a slow but steady pace, the fire burned most effectively and with a steady flame.

As we prayed and considered this over time, we were directed to the passage in Malachi I quoted earlier. The flame is the Refiner's fire; the bellows a reminder that our Refiner is in perfect control of the refining process. Our Church is a house of God within which refining is proceeding in these last days.

We're trusting God to show us more about this over time. For now, we know that we can trust God for what He is doing in this "house" - this fellowship of believers.

For our part we ought to examine ourselves to be certain that the worst that could be said of us is that we are "little Christ's."