

1Peter 11-06-03a

This is Friday the 3rd of June, 2011. We continue our study in the letter of 1 Peter. We resume tonight at chapter 4, verse 12.

We'll take a moment as we begin to dedicate this time to the Lord and ensure that our souls are sanctified and amenable to the ministry of God's Holy Spirit. Shall we pray? Father, we recognize as the time grows short before the return of the Lord Jesus how important it is to invest our time wisely and to be good stewards of the opportunities that you give us. We thank you for this opportunity to spend time together in fellowship and in the study of your word, to receive the benefit of the gifts that you've distributed amongst us, to be edified and encouraged and built up.

We thank you for the message that is contained in this portion of your word and we ask your blessing on us as we study it together tonight. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen. Let's take a look at this fresh section of 1 Peter.

I think we are familiar with who the letter is to and what the letter is about. Nevertheless, it is helpful to remember that context is important. There is an initial audience that had a set of circumstances and there was a reason that God the Holy Spirit impelled the author to write to that audience.

This is true for all of scripture. And we really get an interpretive tool, an aid, helpful clues by looking at that. And so we have reminded ourselves week by week that Peter is writing to people who are not of the context in which they live.

They are not native Greeks and Romans. They are not a part of that. And their heritage, both as Jews and much more as Jewish Christians, separates them.

We have difficulty entering into this because our culture for many centuries has been Judeo-Christian in its underpinnings at least. And it is really only in recent days that there has really started to be a real divergence in the public discourse and public expectations for just within living memory and for decades and centuries before the present, certainly in this country, it is not a bad thing to be a Christian. Many of the colonies that later became the early states of this nation wrote into their constitutions and into their requirements for office that somebody would be a God-fearing Christian in language a little bit more eloquent than that.

But we took oaths on the Bible. So help me God. And in courtrooms all across the land for decades upon decades upon decades, that is how you took an oath.

You laid your hand on the Bible and said, I swear to tell the truth. And it was a part of our context. So we have to make an additional effort to understand how faith and the object of faith would make these people, the recipients of this letter, stand out.

It immediately separated them. The only way we can really enter into this is by looking at other examples. And rather than looking at other religions, I prefer to look at maybe more prominent examples of Christian persuasions or Christian denominations.

Take, for example, the Amish and their particular understanding of the word of God and their particular persuasion when it comes to living out their faith. They are God-fearing, Bible-believing Christians. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But the way they understand certain passages of scripture, they eschew things that they think partake of the world. And so that sets them apart. If you're Amish, you dress a certain way.

You live a certain way. Your transportation is of a certain kind. And you cannot go anywhere without standing out.

People that haven't been in Pennsylvania or been around the Amish much got a little bit of insight into this years ago. There was a Harrison Ford movie called *The Witness*, and there was a little Amish boy and his mother that were in a bus station or something. Murder takes place in the men's room while he's in there trying to get more comfortable.

And he witnesses this murder, and he's the only eyewitness. So the perpetrator is after him. And so Harrison Ford has to go out and live amongst the Amish.

And it's a very interesting insight and not a bad representation, at least a Hollywoodized version of what the Amish are like. But my point is this. You say, well, then if he's writing to them and the section we're going to look at tonight, he's going to really talk about the difference.

And that people are going to come after you because of the difference. They are going to persecute you because of the difference. They are going to speak ill.

They are going to discriminate. They are going to cause problems and try to actively make you not just uncomfortable but prosecute you, cost you something for your faith. And Peter is going to talk about that.

And we say, well, I'm not really in that situation, so I can just comfortably let this section go on by. So I was kind of thinking about that. Well, if you're looking at something that doesn't directly apply, what is the usefulness of it? And what occurs to me is that even though we don't have sort of an overt look at how you dress or look at how you behave, I see you driving to church on a Sunday.

I'm going to persecute you for that. That's not our experience. What is our experience? It is the values that we hold, the entertainment that we refuse to let into our houses, the places we do not go and the things that we do not do.

We are pretty much not so much in what we do as what we don't do. We can blend. You can go

to the mall this weekend.

You can go up and down the aisles of the various retail places. I'm talking mainly to the ladies now. Men will be in Home Depot or Lowe's or possibly Guitar Center, but mostly blend with the public, nobody's going to look at us.

You can wear some sort of a religiously-minded t-shirt or something. Nobody's going to refuse you service or frown at you. Especially here in Texas, we are still a largely Christian-friendly area.

That isn't going to cost us anything. It doesn't set us back. We don't take any thought or any care of whether or not we are going to be identifiably Christian when we go out and mix and mingle.

Our challenge is to live out our faith in these comfortable circumstances. We're not persecuted. We're not looked at differently.

It puts us at ease. It's almost more dangerous to be comfortable in your culture because if the culture is comfortable with us, we tend to get comfortable with the culture. When the culture drifts away from biblical values, we drift right along with it.

We're increasingly inured to things that show up in our entertainment that would have shocked and dismayed and raised the ire of families all over the nation had that same content somehow made it onto a black-and-white television set back in the early 1960s or even into the early 70s. We had a much more conservative average set of values back then than we do now, but we have drifted. We just wait until the scene passes.

I'm not necessarily saying let's all restrict ourselves to G-rated things. You can't really say Disney anymore. Disney is as bad as the rest of them, if not worse.

But here's the point. When we look at this section tonight, Peter is talking to people who are aliens because of their faith, and we should be aliens because of our faith. Maybe not in the same way.

We're not going to be overtly persecuted. We're not going to be hailed up before a judge or a court somewhere. Our neighbor is not going to sue us because they really have despised us ever since they found out we were Christians, which is what was happening to these people.

But we are nevertheless under attack. There is a hostility that has taken a more generic and national form. There is this overt, obvious effort to expunge references to Christianity from everything.

No praying at any public venues. You can freely mention any deity. You can freely set up a worship center for any faith except Christianity.

This is true on military bases. This is true in public school venues. This is true on college

campuses.

I was reading a thing earlier this week. There are college campuses where they've got Islamic worship fellowship meetings advertised all over the campus. They've set aside a space on the campus where Muslims can come and worship.

They can freely say anything and do anything they want to do with regard to Allah and Muhammad and all the rest of it. They can observe all of their feasts and be just as overtly Muslim as they would like to be. But it is forbidden to mention the name of Jesus Christ in any classroom.

It is forbidden to put up any sort of a Bible study flyer. Anything related to Bible, Christianity, Christ, Jesus, church of any kind, you can get suspended. You can get kicked out of school for doing that on the very same campus.

So there is this hostility, and it has gotten gradually worse. The secular humanist liberal forces very wisely, very cleverly, took Liddell Hart's advice and have used the strategy of the indirect approach. Instead of confronting Christianity head-on in our culture and in the generation in which they existed, which is now pretty much the people who grew up in the late 60s and early 70s and into the 80s, instead of taking it head-on, instead of facing down and debating the proponents of Christianity, what they did is they said, let's let this generation be.

We'll let these churches go. We're going to go into the education system. We're going to change the minds of the children.

We're going to start inculcating them in kindergarten and first grade and second grade with, Heather has two mommies, and it's just as bigoted. It's racist to be anti-perversion. Anti-perversion gets the racist label, even though it has nothing to do with race.

But you immediately polarize a conversation as soon as you say, that's racist, that's bigoted. It's guilt by association. You associate your aversion to perversion with something that is widely agreed to be evil.

Well, you associate it, you glue it together, and now, oh, this is no different. Looking askance at homosexuals is no different than looking askance at somebody because of their skin color or their culture or their religion. They succeeded in getting this into the schools, and so now we have a generation that is amoral.

They're not immoral. They are amoral. They are moral-less, and there is a floating standard.

This is the hostility has come in and camped in our backyard instead of making assault on our front door, but we're in it. So that's my preface to the section we're going to look at tonight in 1 Peter 4 to recognize that this really does apply to us, but not so much in the overt arena. Nobody's going to pound on our door and try to get us arrested for our faith.

What are they going to do? Well, as we look at what Peter has to say under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we will see, I think, the applicability of this. But look, beginning in verse 12, Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange thing happened to you. And right away, I think, you know, there might be people in other countries for which this is very true, but here in this country, are we going to be in a fiery trial? But rejoice to the extent you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

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

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. 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? Well, if you were reading this for devotions, and you say, well, fiery trial, and you say, well, this is probably an opportunity that God has described that applies to other people, but I'm just really not expecting a fiery trial, and I'm going to miss out on this opportunity to rejoice to the extent that I'm partaking of Christ's sufferings. I just don't really feel like I'm partaking of that.

But if you think about what Peter says here, he doesn't say, beloved, don't think it's strange concerning the fiery trial which might try you. He says the fiery trial which is to try you. And what's helpful to us is to see the antecedents of this statement, because if you remember, he has talked about this before.

If you turn back to chapter 1, verse 6, he has talked about the inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire. And we didn't have much trouble realizing that our faith is refined in the fire, tested for the purpose of approval.

Is it going to stand up under the heat? And this is true, just as true for us as it is for anybody in any generation. I recently had a discussion with a bunch of godless, secular, atheist, God-hating, Christian, hostile people on the subject of happiness. I think I mentioned this last week because Stephen Hawking made this comment that religious people who believe in an afterlife are just living for a fairytale.

And I took umbrage at that because, you know, if you're going to say that, what you believe about the future is a fairytale, well, everybody, including Stephen Hawking and everybody that is a

secular, humanist, atheist, godless, mindless person is living for a fairytale. Because I asked him, I said, OK, well, if you're not living for the afterlife, what are you living for? What's the meaning of your life? Well, I'm trying to be a good person and benefit my fellow man. Well, how do you know if your fellow man is actually being benefited or not? Well, you know, future generations, you know, we receive the benefits, somebody invented computers and air conditioning and iPods and hot showers and automobiles, and I'm benefiting from that.

And so I expect that, you know, in some small way, as one of the ants in the anthill here, you know, we're going to accomplish something and future generations are going to be benefited. I said, well, how do you know future generations aren't going to be wiped out by a, you know, worldwide atomic bomb or, you know, wormwood asteroids going to hit and wipe it? You don't know if there's even going to be a future generation. And you certainly don't know if your small little pusillanimous efforts here are going to do anything to benefit, you know, a lot of people thought they were going to benefit future generations.

Think about the people who were, you know, treating diseases with medicines that turned out to be harmful. Remember when they used to x-ray everything? When I was a little boy, you could go to the shoe store and they'd x-ray your foot to make sure your shoes fit good. Well, then everybody started coming down with cancer.

They were like, well, you know, this is going to help podiatry and everybody's shoes are going to fit better. I'm benefiting future generations. A whole bunch of people came down with cancer because they were x-raying you at the airport.

They were x-raying you walking in and out of just commonplace and people were getting all these rads of radiation building up and they said, whoops, you know, what about thalidomide? That was supposed to be a good thing. What about treating syphilis? Syphilis was, you know, decimating people all over the place and they found a really effective treatment. It worked great by treating them with mercury.

Mercury just totally cured the syphilis. That was great. You know, until they found out that mercury poisoning was, you know, ruining things.

So you don't know. You're assuming. It's a fairy tale.

You're just telling yourself something to make yourself feel good about the future. Well, how's that any different than what you think about religious faith? But here's the thing. The fiery trial that is to test your faith.

Because our faith is tested. We're not tested in the overt sense. It's kind of like the Old Testament has so many overt examples of trials in the wilderness that have a spiritual analog for us.

We're not wandering in the wilderness and we're not worried about whether the man is going to

be there tomorrow or God's going to bring water from a rock or anything. But our happinesses, our ups and downs are in the same range as they have been for humanity throughout history. This was my point in bringing up this discussion is I said, look, let's say you did invent the iPod and you invent the video game and you invent air conditioning and you invent these things and you say, oh, life is so much better.

You cure polio. You invent that. You're Jonas Salk.

You invent the polio vaccine and now people don't get polio. And OK, great. So 75 years ago, somebody had polio and I don't.

But people's range of happiness, regardless, certainly you have events that depress your mood. They can they can bring you down for a time. But generally speaking, our range of happiness, we're very adaptable.

People lose a limb. It's very traumatic. But 10 years later, they have wonderful, ebullient, ecstatic days and they have dark, dim, depressing days, just like somebody that's still got their leg or still got their arm.

You're certain we we adjust. We adapt. You know, used to be before air conditioning, people's physiology would adapt to the prevailing temperature for the season.

I know this because I have been at 29 Palms for two weeks at a time with zero air conditioning. And after you've been there a couple of I grew up in Barstow and we didn't have air conditioning. But you adjust.

I lived in Okinawa for well, we were on float for six months and the ship wasn't air conditioned. Not where I was working. And my my quarters and barracks and the field and every place I went in Okinawa that whole year that I was overseas.

The only time I ever got saw air conditioning was in the PX or the commissary. And I like to froze to death in there because you adjust, you adapt. And in 100 degree day, that might be cool if it's been 110 for the last four or five days.

You say, wow, it's only 100 today, really roll up my sleeves. So the human psyche, our human experience has the same range of ups and downs. Yes, of course.

If you have an ongoing heavy burden to bear, you're caring for somebody with Alzheimer's. You've got a grinding, wasting disease. Yes, you're one of the outliers.

You're going to be someone who is often depressed. You might be somebody that's just filthy rich, can buy whatever you want. You're Charlie Sheen on drugs and you're just happy all the time for some period.

You're another outlier. But average human experience, if you think about it, think about some relatively well off Roman family at the time that Peter is writing this letter, they're going to have good days and bad. They don't have anything we've got.

They've got no electricity. They may not have a fraction of the amenities that we've got, but you read the literature, read the poets. People had just effervescent happiness and they had dark, monotonous, horrible days.

The range is the same. My point is this. Our faith is going to get tested, not to a lesser extent and not to a greater extent than people in other times and you say, well, now wait a minute.

Now that's going beyond the pale. What about these people that got locked up and thrown to the lions? If you look at the number of Christians in the last 2000 years, how many Christians actually were imprisoned? I mean, it could be many thousands. There have been people who were impaled.

But there's been a lot of unbelievers that that has happened to. Look at what happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Look at what happened under Pol Pot.

Look at what happened under Chairman Mao and Uncle Ho and Stalin, not to mention the obvious capital H that everybody wants to mention in this context. But there has been human suffering and human happiness boxing the compass as long as humans have been around. So yes, you're going to have outlier circumstances.

You're going to have people that are extremely oppressed. You're going to have people that are just extremely well off. But on average, we adjust to the circumstances that we're in.

I heard a fascinating interview on the radio, on National People's Radio a couple of weeks ago. They were talking to these guys. One guy was a white guy, well off, and he was kind of wanting to do good.

So he was working with inner-city youth. And there was this black guy who was younger and who was one of the inner-city youth. He and his brother were one of the guys that this guy got to know when they were just kids.

And so they were describing about how they first met. They just published a book talking about their experiences and what a life-changing thing it was that this guy got involved in this young black kid's life and what a difference it had made. So he said, well, tell us how you first met little so-and-so and his brother.

He says, well, I went down and I was working with these people. Here these two homeless boys came. They had no place to stay.

They had no parents. They had nothing. All of their possessions were in a black plastic trash bag.

He said, the thing that made them stand out to me is they were just so happy. They were the happiest, joking-est, cutting-up-est kids I ever saw. I was drawn to them because they were just so upbeat.

I was surprised at how nonchalant they were about the whole thing. They were in horrible circumstances. Their mother actually was in town somewhere, but she was on drugs and hanging around with all the wrong people.

They couldn't even stay at home. They were just going from shelter to shelter, and he got acquainted with them. But it struck me that this is really the case.

You can be in what seems to be just dire circumstances and just be happy as a clam. We adjust. We adapt.

We find our range of happiness, generally speaking. As I say, there are outliers, but this is in general. So this is a long way of making the point of this passage.

When Peter says that you're going to encounter fiery trials of your faith, we are. He says, don't be surprised and don't think it's strange. Sometimes we think it's even more strange because we look around and we say, why do I feel so taxed? Why do I feel so stressed? Why do I feel it? Because my circumstances don't look that bad.

I'm not hungry. I'm not in poverty. I'm not in jail.

I'm not suffering physically. I don't have some horrible, wasting, flesh-eating bacteria disease. Look at me.

What's the matter with me? Why do I feel so bad? Why am I so stressed? Why is my faith under such an attack? I don't see the enemy. The enemy seems to just be me. What's the matter with me? This is our more common fiery trial.

But don't think your faith is not going to be tested in a very potent and visceral way. It is. It's a part of life.

And in the same way that in the past it took military invasion or oppression or persecution or imprisonment or impoverishment or whatever else to create circumstances that people would be tested in, in our day we tend to think it isn't going to happen because we're surrounded with the trappings of civilization and technology. But the human soul is the same, and the things that burden us and oppress us create just as much stress on our soul. And we may seem kind of embarrassed or ashamed.

I can't believe that I'm feeling as bad sitting here in my air-conditioned comfort as some poor recipient of this letter back in the first century A.D. who, you know, there were swords and rocks and sharp things and, you know, very little by way of comfort. How could I possibly compare my

test to theirs? Well, we need to get over that because it's not the cause and effect. A poor analogy that I've used before is it's when you go to the gym and you've got a really muscly guy and he's benching, you know, 200 pounds.

And when I sit down, I am not going to bench 200 pounds. I might get 80 pounds. But for me, the level of strain and the level of stress and the level of challenge is the same for me with 80 pounds as it is for this more muscly guy that's got two or three times that weight.

And he's he, and he's got his roto, and he's got his little barbell to push up and down. I've got mine. And it doesn't matter that, well, but my barbell's not nearly as heavy as his.

Who cares? For me, this is as hard as it gets, and I'm having real trouble with the pressure that's on me. So here's the point that I think really stands out in this section. When Peter says, do not think it's strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.

Don't worry about what people in the past went through. Don't worry about what people in other countries are going through. Don't worry about what people on the other side of the picket fence are going through or what people on the other side of the bedroom wall or what people on the other side of the bed are going through.

You have a soul, and God has tailor-made and designed testing. He allows certain things through the defense to test us, and for us, it is a fiery trial. It's not a maybe.

It's not a, well, if we're invaded and the sky turns black and we go into nuclear winter, then you're going to get a fiery trial. No. We are going to get fiery trial of our faith.

The danger is that because we are so comfortable in our culture and so comfortable in our relative affluence that we don't notice that our faith is being tested because we've slowly built up a callous. We've slowly built up a tolerance for the things that ought to tax us and ought to test us, and it's like, well, today I'm watching TV and, you know, somebody's shirt is just too tight, and next week, well, now their stuff is cut too low, and, well, the next week, the rest of it is cut too high, and the next week, there's not enough of it, and the next week, half of it is gone, and the next week, it's all gone, and we just tolerate. We get inured.

We get comfortable. We say, oh, well, you know, that's almost not as bad as what I saw last week. Well, what happened to our faith? What happened to our standards would be a better question.

What happened to our priorities? What happened to our recognition of the doctrine that says garbage in, garbage out? As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. And we compromise, and we settle, and we extemporize, and we excuse, and what should have been a fiery test of our faith is not a test at all because we've already opened the gates wide and said, hey, no problem. I'm with you.

I'm on the train. Let's go down the temptation trail here. It's no temptation for me because I put up no resistance.

It's not fiery if you don't resist it. It's not fiery if you're flammable and you like being on fire. It's not fiery at all.

It's fun. And we should expect to be tested somewhere, someplace, somehow. And if you don't feel tested, probably you gave in.

Do not think it's strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you. It is here to try you. But it's sort of like an arm wrestling match.

You know, it ought to be a really hard arm wrestling match if you're trying. But if you're just limp and you don't try, well, that wasn't hard. It didn't break a sweat.

I expended no calories. What kind of a fiery trial do you call that? Well, none. Why? Because you just default out.

So our danger is slightly different than these people. They knew they were going to be in hostile circumstances that they couldn't really do anything about. We are in hostile circumstances, and we may have already done the wrong thing about it.

And what we need to look for is where have I compromised? Where have I just taken down my fences and let the enemy overrun my position and not even tried? God can't try me with fire because my stuff's already burned up. Nothing here but ashes to begin with. And it's not going to be our entire life.

It's going to be an area. And what we do is we look at the parts that are still standing. Well, you know, it only got the backyard, not the front.

And the front looks fine. That's what people see when they drive by. You know, how many people know that my backyard's all burned down? Well, you know, we tend to think we fool ourselves.

We say, well, but look at all these things that are going right. Look at all the things I'm doing right. What we want to do is look at what's going wrong.

Let's find the other 15 or 20 or 25 percent where there ought to be a test of our faith and we ought to be passing the test instead of handing the test in blank and not even trying. Do not be surprised. Do not think it's strange.

Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings. Do you know how easy it would have been for the Lord Jesus Christ to not make an issue of himself, to never speak up where the Pharisees could hear him? If Jesus just didn't teach when the Pharisees were around, how much fiery trial would he have had? How much suffering would he have undergone? Oh, there's a

Pharisee. Come on, boys, let's go inside the house.

I'll tell you a few things in private here. Jesus made an issue when it was imprudent to do so. He accomplished his mission uncompromisingly, prayerfully, completely 100 percent dedicated to doing the will of his Father, regardless of the consequences to himself, and he didn't compromise.

He didn't hide. He didn't water it down. He didn't sugarcoat it.

He didn't aim it to please. He didn't edit it for content. He didn't say, woe to them, scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites, did he? He didn't take the disciples on top of the mountain and say, okay, twelve, listen up.

Woe to them, scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites. What did he say? Woe to you. You, scribes.

You, Pharisees. You, hypocrites. This is what you do.

You are filling up the measure of your fathers who murdered the prophets and so on. He didn't compromise, but he easily could have. Can you imagine how easy it would have been, how smooth his path would have been if he had just done a few things differently? Well, I just won't raise any eyebrows.

I'll say this in such an indirect way that they won't know I'm saying anything against the going trend of theological teaching and so on. Jesus didn't do it. Well, how do you partake of the suffering of Christ? We have to look at what is essential.

There are non-essential things, and I don't mean to pick on entertainment or whatever. That's the only convenient example I could think of. But we need to decide what is essential and what is non-essential.

Non-essential things, it doesn't really matter. We're always going to be in the world, even though we're not of it. But have we allowed our ease with inconsequential, non-essential things to creep into essential areas? Are there essential things that we have let slide, that we have averted any test and any real challenge and any fiery trial, because we've just kind of recategorized an essential as a non-essential? Well, it's not really that important.

It's not really that big a deal. I don't see where anybody's really getting hurt. I don't see that it's really affecting anything.

So I'm going to put it over in this category and let it slide. Well, surprise, surprise, no fiery trial. So it's something for us to think about and to remember that in every generation, these scriptures are true.

There should always be some area of our faith that is being tested. And if we don't feel tested, we need to look around and figure out if we've actually got all of our stuff standing, because we

should be growing through exercise. We should be pushing against resistance with our faith.

And if you sit down at the weight machine and you say, wow, this is just so easy, well, look and see if the weights fell off. Don't just assume that we've gotten so strong that it's no longer a challenge. Maybe something's wrong with the machine.

Maybe something's wrong with the setup. Maybe something's wrong with our assumptions. Because we should be growing through stress.

The trial of your faith worketh what? The testing of your faith produces patience. And let patience have its perfect work in you that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. But that whole perfect and complete lacking nothing begins with what? Testing.

If we don't feel tested, how are we ever going to be perfect? How are we going to be perfect and complete, lacking nothing? There's got to be a test somewhere. And if we don't feel tested, time to check. Let's pause here and take our break.

When we come back, we'll continue in 1 Peter chapter 4.