

May 21, 2023

1 Peter 4:12-19

# “Do Not Be Surprised At The Fiery Trial”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesse Yow wrote his book *Standing Firm* in 2015. I would like to share the following:

Recently the U.S. and Canada have begun experiencing two incremental developments that have a special impact on Christians and the Church: 1) portrayal of Christians, Christian beliefs, and the Bible as hateful and bigoted; and 2) attempts to limit Christian's constitutional freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly to a much narrower freedom of private worship. These trends have been incremental, proceeding in a series of small steps over the past years, but will eventually have a cumulatively devastating effect on Christians and the Church if they continue unchecked.

Well, here we are only 8 years later. So what do you think? They are so far unchecked. I think that we are certainly beginning to feel the "cumulatively devastating effect" that Jesse Yow was writing about. Hostility that singles out Christians and Churches has become more organized and is growing. The ideas and ideals of those seeking to remove or minimize the role of Christianity in the public square is taking shape through censorship. Here we are beginning to see the suppression, banning, and deletion of Christian speech, writing, and art. Moreover, individual Christians and Churches are facing more and more legal threats, financial threats, investigations, and violence in varying degrees.

How did we get to this place in our country and throughout the world? What we are seeing is parallel to what Paul writes in the book of Romans. This is what happens when people know God but do not honor or give thanks to him, but become futile in their thinking and darkened in their foolish hearts. There comes a point when God gives them over to their impure desires since they have exchanged the truth for a lie. Paul writes in Romans 1:28-32,

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

It is terribly upsetting to see these things growing in our day and age. The truth is that people are turning away from God, rejecting God's truth while encouraging others to do the same, and God is giving them over to do what they want. With this kind of unraveling of society, it is no wonder as to why the Christian can expect more and more hostility. Jesus says in John 7:7, that the world "hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil." And, in John 15:18-20 we hear Jesus say to his disciples:

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose

you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours ..."

Hostility toward Christians and Churches is on the rise. But what we are experiencing, and about to experience, isn't something that others haven't endured before us. In fact, there has always been a degree of hostility in every society throughout history. Perhaps what's hard for us now is to see this hostility growing in our own lifetimes. And then we consider what things will be like for our children and grandchildren. What can we do about this situation? The answer lies in our epistle lesson for this morning, and you may not necessarily like to hear these words from the apostle Peter, but here they are:

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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you ... Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

**Do Not Be Surprised At The Fiery Trial.** And yet look at us and how easy it is to feel surprised and upset about what we've been warned about for so many years. I say to you, do not be anxious, whining, or grumbling, but continue to bear witness to the truth. That's what Peter writes in the chapter before our epistle lesson. Listen carefully: "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience ... (1 Pet. 3:13-17)." In other words, take advantage of the situation and continue to speak the truth regardless of the many consequences that are before you.

A fiery trial is not easy. And, make no mistake about it, one is making its way to us. We are bid to entrust our souls to our faithful Creator while continuing to do good. Even more, we are to rejoice because we know that if we share in the sufferings of Jesus, we will also share in his glory. We are blessed in the cross and empty tomb! The Spirit of the glory of God rests on us. In other words, we are made all the more certain in a fiery trial that we are believers in Christ, and have the forgiveness of sins and the hope of everlasting life.

You see, every fiery trial, which we must face, is to be faced with the confidence that is found in the book of Isaiah where our Lord and Creator says to each of us: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior (Is. 43:1-3)." We find our strength in the one who has redeemed and saved us. He has called us by name in Baptism and we are his. No one can overcome us. Though they may take away our lives, goods, fame, child, and wife, the kingdom is ours forever. We will rise from the dead and reign with Jesus victoriously. The fiery trial will not consume us, even though it may appear that it has.

Once again, we see how important the cross truly is. It is in that cross that we have the forgiveness of sins and the hope of everything good that has been earned for us by the good one - Jesus. In fact, it is in the fiery trial that we even see our Savior more clearly. Our epistle lesson says that our fiery trials are a test. And you know what a test is all about. It is never so that God can figure out what we might do. Rather, it is a point of self-examination to see where we are in our walk with Jesus. Every fiery trial for the child of God is a refining fire that brings up our impurities, so that they may be removed, and we might become pure, precious metal. That is the guarantee that we have from God. The flame shall not consume us even in those moments where it looks as if it has. We will not be set ablaze but saved.

Consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego and their trial by literal fire. They were told to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. The penalty for not doing so was to be cast into the burning fiery furnace. Their answer: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up (Dan. 3:16-18).” They were able to say that, and really mean it, because they were trusting in the Messiah who was to come.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego faced death if they refused to submit to the secular scheme of imposing a uniform, non-Christian style of worship on the nation. I seriously doubt that they wanted to go into that furnace, but they willingly faced death rather than compromise their faith. And, at least in this particular instance, even the king was made to see that in the furnace was the pre-incarnate Son of God with them in this trial by fire. And, to this day, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego testify that the Lord our God is with us and saves us. Indeed! In the cross of Jesus and his gracious presence among us we are able to say: “Whether God delivers me or not, I am always delivered from every fiery trial in the cross and empty tomb. The flames will not set me ablaze!”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott