

“Judgment Begins with the House of God”
(1 Peter 4:17-19)

Introduction: Americans like things to be clean. We like to have spotless homes. We like things to be in place and in order. That may not be the way that it ends up in reality, but that doesn't mean that we don't prefer that it be that way. And there is certainly nothing wrong with this. God is also a God of order. He likes to have His house in order. He likes things to be clean and in place. I am not referring now to the building, even though I believe that the Lord would have this building to be kept up and the things within it maintained. But He desires that our lives be in order, that our lives be clean, not merely from the outward filth, but from the moral corruption which still lingers within our souls. He wants us to be a holy and a pure people. Sin is not easily separated from a man, not even a regenerate one. It takes a lot of effort for the people of God to put off their sins. But God is in the process of helping us remove that sin. He is refining us, and He is purifying us, to make us more like His Son. And the way that He does this is through trial.

We saw last week Peter exhorting his hearers in the midst of their sufferings, to make sure that they do not suffer for doing what is wrong, but only for what is right. If they suffer for committing some evil, no one ought to pity them for that, for they are only getting what they deserve. But, on the other hand, if they suffer as a Christian, for doing what is right and good in the sight of God, and if they persevere through it and do not fall away, in this they should rejoice and glorify God. They should rejoice because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon them. They should rejoice because their lives have been so transformed by the Spirit's work that it has drawn the hatred of the world upon them. They may also rejoice knowing that the One who gives them the strength to persevere through these very difficult trials, will never leave them nor forsake them. If this is true of you, you have cause to rejoice as well. Remember that Jesus was holy, and He was hated and persecuted by the world. If you begin to appear as He did to the world, then you too will receive the same treatment that they gave to Him. Jesus endured to the end of His sufferings and was crowned the King of kings. If you endure with Him, you will also reign with Him.

Our passage this evening continues this theme of suffering, and gives us greater insight into God's purposes in it. What it tells us is that,

God is sitting in His Temple as a refiner to purify His children that they might offer to Him holy sacrifices.

I. When God Brings Judgment into the World, It Seems that He Often Begins with His House.

- A. Peter Writes, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.”
 - 1. Perhaps his readers are beginning to wonder, “What is going on here? Why are we suffering and those who are doing evil are going unpunished?”
 - a. Peter tells them why. This “fiery ordeal” which he mentions in verse 12, is really the judgment of God.
 - b. What does he mean by this? It is obviously not God's judgment of condemnation, at least not in all circumstances. There is a stronger word in the Greek to signify

- this. The word he uses here means simply the judgment, or the process by which the evidence is tried.
- c. We have already seen that He sends trials into the lives of His people to try them, to see what they are made of, to see if their profession of faith is genuine, to give them assurance if it is, and to provoke them to seek Him if it is not.
 - d. What Peter is saying here is that God's trial has begun within the church. It is starting here, although later it will move outside.
 - e. God has sent the refining fire of judgment, and it is leaving no one untouched.
 - f. Those who are His children are being purified and strengthened by it. Their hearts are being cleansed from sin and their faith and holiness is increasing.
 - g. On the other hand, those who are the chaff are being driven away and burned up. They are leaving the church, they are falling away from the Lord.
 - h. This is often the result of a trial upon the covenant community of God. It purifies the church. If Christianity were suddenly outlawed, and it was no longer safe to be called a Christian, but now a crime punishable by death, how many of you would continue to identify with Him? How many of you would continue to worship Him publicly?
 - i. Obviously, we would take whatever precautions were necessary so that we don't walk out into the open only to be slaughtered. But would we be willing even to die for our Lord?
 - j. When this has happened in the past, the number of the faithful turns out to be exceedingly small.
 - k. Peter says that these trials are the dividing and discerning judgment of God.
2. Interestingly, the place that it begins is with the household of God.
 - a. This phrase would be better translated "from the house of God."
 - b. The household of God emphasizes the family of God. The house of God emphasizes the Temple or the building in which God dwells. This Temple, in the New Covenant, is all true believers.
 - c. Peter has already used this phrase in 2:5, where he tells us that "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."
 - d. Peter here seems to be drawing upon the OT imagery from two passages: Ezekiel 9 and Malachi 3.
 - e. In Ezekiel 9, we see several parallels. The Lord is in the city of Jerusalem, and He calls to His executioners to come near. He sends one messenger out ahead of them to put a mark on the forehead of all who were sighing and groaning over all the abominations which were committed in the midst of the city. Then He calls to the others to go out after the messenger and to kill everyone upon whom the mark was not found. He says, "Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark" (v. 6).
 - f. Interestingly, the Lord says, "And you shall start from My sanctuary. So they started with the elders who *were* before the temple." Peter says that the judgment begins with the house of God.
 - g. The words "start" and "Temple" used here by Ezekiel, are the same words in the Greek which Peter uses for "begin" and "house."

- h. Both passages also make reference to God's glory both before and after. In Ezekiel 9:3, we read, "Then the glory of the God of Israel went up from the cherub on which it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed in linen at whose loins was the writing case." And in 10:4, we read, "Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD."
- i. In 1 Peter, we read in 4:14, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." And afterwards, in 5:1, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed."
- j. The last parallel between the two passages is that Ezekiel mentions that the judgment begins with the elders in God's house, "So they started with the elders who *were* before the temple" (9:6). This is also the first group that Peter exhorts in 5:1, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ."
- k. It seems very likely that this is the picture which is in Peter's mind as he writes that God's judgment will begin with God's house, which is now the church, according to 2:5, and from there will spread out to destroy all the unbelievers.
- l. But this passage of Peter calls to mind another picture from the OT, that of Malachi 3. In Malachi 3:1-5, the Lord declares, "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts. '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 fullers' soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,' says the LORD of hosts."
- m. In Malachi, the Lord Himself is the purifying fire who purifies the priests first, so that they might offer to Him acceptable sacrifices. Then the judgment which begins at the Lord's house, the Temple, will move to the unbelievers, no longer as a refining fire, but now as a fiery judgment of condemnation.
- o. Peter writes, "For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"
- p. God's presence is in His Temple, in His people, and He is purifying them through the fires of trial. They should not be surprised therefore by the fiery ordeal among them, but should rejoice that the refining fire, Spirit of glory and of God, is resting upon them.

B. This Is Not an Easy Process. He Writes, "It is with difficulty that the righteous man is

saved.”

1. Whoever said that the Christian life is easy, or trouble-free? Whoever said that salvation is an easy thing?
2. It is with difficulty that the righteous man is saved. The phrase can be translated “scarcely” or “barely” saved.
 - a. Luke records concerning Christ, “And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. And someone said to Him, ‘Lord, are there *just* a few who are being saved?’ And He said to them, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able’” (13:22-24).
 - b. The Christian life is an arduous struggle. It is elsewhere compared to the strong taking a city. It is a life-long fight against the devil, against the world, and against the flesh. It is a life of self-denial and suffering.
 - c. Christ tells us that there are those who will seek to be saved and will not be able. They will not be able because they will not be willing to give up all that is necessary. They will not be willing to lay down their lives that they might take them again. They will not be willing to lose their lives in this world to save them in the next. They will never be willing to receive Christ on His terms, and therefore will have the door closed in their face.
 - d. They as well will not be willing to endure the crosses, the trials, the tribulations which are necessary to purify them of their sins and to fit them for heaven.
 - e. It is with difficulty that the righteous are saved. And only those who are Christ’s will be able to endure to the end.

II. But if the Righteous Are Barely Saved, What Will Happen to Those Who Are the Unrighteous?

- A. Peter Writes, “If it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the Gospel of God?”
 1. If God would so put His children through the fires of adversity, what does He have in store for those who do not obey the Gospel, for those who refuse to yield themselves to the will of Christ?
 2. What will become of the rebel, who seeks to dwell in the camp of Christ’s army, but will not bow the knee to Him as Lord?
 3. “If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?”
- B. The Implication Is that the Fires of God’s Judgment Will Burn Up All of Their Sin as well.
 1. However, since they are godless men and sinners, they will be wholly consumed by the flames, and nothing will emerge on the other side of the refiner’s fire. They will be totally consumed in the crucible of His judgment. This does not mean that they will be annihilated, only that they will be completely swept away in the judgment of God into everlasting burnings.
 2. I pray that this is not the condition of any of you here this evening.
 - a. This is an age in which the grace of God is revealed more fully and perfectly than at any other time in the history of God’s dealings with man on earth.

- b. It is a time when the knowledge of God is continuing to cover the land, as the waters cover the seas. Whereas once there was no light outside of Israel, now there is a flood of light which is filling the earth.
- c. The light is the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It tells us how we might escape God's coming wrath and stand before Him blameless on that day. It tells us how we can have all of our sins forgiven and how we can have a perfect righteousness given to us as a free gift.
- d. Don't be left on the outside when God shuts the door of His salvation once and for all. Those who are outside will have their part in the lake which burns with fire. They will be forever swept away in the judgment of God.
- e. But those who enter by the door will find God's salvation through His Son Jesus Christ.
- f. Enter that door now. Enter in and find escape from judgment and fellowship with God. You will never be sorry that you did. Turn to God through Christ and be saved.

III. But for Those of You Who Are the Lord's Tonight, What Does Peter Tell You to Do in the Midst of This Judgment? He Says, "Let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

- A. Remember that these Trials Which We Are Now Experiencing Are a Part of the Christian's Experience.
 - 1. There is nothing strange happening to you.
 - a. The Lord is in His Temple, and He is sitting as a smelter and purifier of silver, the purifier of you, His people.
 - b. He is purifying you through His Word, through His truth. He has brought it to you that He might make you clean.
 - c. He is purifying you that you might be able to offer to Him acceptable sacrifices, in holiness and righteousness all your days.
 - 2. These things God has planned for you, His children, because of His love for you. They are "according to the will of God."
- B. Therefore, Entrust Yourself to God and Do What Is Right.
 - 1. It is so easy to turn from the straight path and do what is wrong. It is so tempting to turn out of the way to avoid the pain. It is so easy to want to jump out of the crucible when it gets too hot. But you must not forget what the consequences are of such action. Like the seeds which were planted in rocky soil, you will wither and die.
 - 2. Instead, Peter says that you must commit yourself to the Lord.
 - a. You must purpose that, when God puts you to the test, you will do what He, in His Word, requires of you.
 - b. You must do what is right, not what feels right, not what seems right, but what is right. You must do what God's Word says.
 - c. And you must commit your eternal soul to the Lord, even as Jesus did on the cross, and trust that He will give you the strength to see it through.
 - d. Remember that you can have joy in the midst of suffering. This short time of trial is less than a moment in the light of eternity. "After you have suffered for a little

while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you” (1 Pet. 5:10), if you remain true to Him.

- e. Endure as seeing Him who is unseen, for He is real, and He will uphold you and cause you to stand in the end, by His grace. Amen.