

“Letter to a Man in the Fire”

2 Peter 3:8-15a

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heart. 13 but in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

14 So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him. 15 Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation...

The gunman stood in the school library of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and pulled a sawed-off shotgun from behind his ankle-length trench coat. Aiming at one of the students who had hit the floor at the sound of gunshots, he said to her: “Do you believe in God?”

“Yes, I do,” Cassie said. He pulled the trigger. Cassie Bernall’s parents, at that moment began walking in the fire. Even though the event happened almost 26 years ago it is fresh in my mind. Two teens went on a killing spree killing 13 and wounding 20 others. Cassie’s parents had to deal with the death of their teen child. The teens with the guns thought they were demonstrating that God can’t save you, but the fact that I remember her name because she dared to say, “Yes, I believe in God” in the face of death says the opposite.

You received notification yesterday. Your company is going through corporate downsizing. You are over 50 years old and out of a job. You are walking in the fire.

You have a secret battle you wage every day. You struggle with sobriety or gambling, or you “fill in the blank”. Your addiction threatens not only your life but impacts the quality of life of all those around you. You and your friends and family, are... walking in the fire.

Your daughter just gave birth to a child who is experiencing severe renal failure. Her kidneys are not functioning. The outlook is grim. You and your daughter are ... walking in the fire. **[NOTE 1]**

You visited the doctor. You fear the worst. She breaks the news: breast cancer. You are walking in the fire. Second Peter chapter 3 is for you and all of us who are walking in the fire or have gone through the fire. Long ago, the Lord spoke to His

people in exile, and gave them this word of comfort: “When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isaiah 43:2). But you feel burned, and so did the church to whom Peter writes in our text. A suffering church, a church in fear of its life, a church tired of waiting for deliverance, a church beginning to give up on the idea that the second coming of Christ was going to happen any time soon. There would be no easy way out of the fire. What now?

Not long ago, Reynolds Price, a professor at Duke University and author of a number of fine novels, received a letter from a medical student. The student had been diagnosed with cancer, and he wrote to Price for solace since the novelist had published a faith-inspiring account of his own recovery from spinal cancer.

The young man had a simple query: (*sit and write*) Dear Dr. Price: I want to believe in a God who cares ... because I may meet him sooner than I had planned. I think I am at the point where I can accept the existence of a God (otherwise I can't explain the origin of the universe...but I can't yet believe he cares about us.) [NOTE 2]

Dr. Price summarizes the man's dilemma this way: “Is there a God, and if so, does He care for us?” These are the questions of everyone walking in the fire. Where is God when we most need Him?

After their initial contact, Dr. Price did not hear from the medical student again, but learned several months later that the young man, Jim, had succumbed to the cancer. Price, who had already begun to develop a response to these questions in a lecture presented at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, now felt an even greater urgency to address the questions Jim had raised. Although Jim was gone, with the encouragement of his family, this short book came into being. In *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, Dr. Price honestly and compassionately responds to the student's request for consolation and spiritual insight into his own pointlessly worsening state of health.

{*Sit down at different spot and start to write*} Dear Jim: It hardly seems appropriate to thank you for letting me know the hard facts of the cancer which has interrupted your medical training. A malignancy in the colon with a spread to the liver and pancreas sounds more daunting to me than the threat of my own tumor years ago. ...I feel some thanks that the even harder questions you ask, have pressed on me a need to think my way again, if only in the most personal manner, into the bottomless mystery of suffering.... What I hear you asking is this: Was our universe created by an intelligent power, and if so, is the Creator conscious of its creatures and benignly concerned for their lives? Does He care, is He concerned for our welfare?

Price goes on to affirm his strong belief in the existence of God but admits that he is troubled by the inability to prove that existence to others. “Nonetheless,” he continues, “What I assert with no doubt is that our one universe was created and is maintained by a single divine intelligence who still exists and continues to oversee His handiwork.”

But Price knows that such an assertion assumes a reservoir of faith. “I'm more than aware that such an assertion of belief from me or any other human being, in whatever time or place, may be of no more value (in the grand scheme of things, in the

secular world) than a paranoid's conviction that the CIA has planted a listening device in his molars" There has to be an element of faith. Very rarely is anyone ever argued into the faith. If you want your friend to enter into a personal relationship with God, LOVE him or her unconditionally, empowered by the Holy Spirit and make sure they know how to pray and commit their lives to living His way. [NOTE 3]

Of course, Dr. Reynolds Price is not the first person to deliver a message of solace and strength. The first letter of Peter exhorts the Christians in Asia Minor who are enduring persecution as well as milder forms of social boycotting and verbal abuse, to be encouraged and stay the course. "Beloved," says Peter, "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (4:12). Do not be shocked by the fiery ordeal of persecution—it is a test of your faith, a trial by fire that will lead to praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:7).

Today's Scripture lesson from the second letter of Peter could also be called a "Letter to a Man in the Fire." Written to members of the church who are being led astray by false teachers who deny that the world will be brought to its conclusion by divine judgment, Peter is firm: "First of all you must understand this," he asserts, "that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'" (3:3-4). Pointing out that the world and its flow of events seem to be moving along quite nicely, without cataclysmic fire or destruction or dissolution or disintegration, these teachers sow seeds of doubt about the coming judgment of God. Where is God, they laugh, when you need Him most? Webster's Dictionary tells us that to "scoff" is to mock with contempt, to make fun of. So there will be people that will make fun of you and try to make it seem stupid to hold on to faith in Jesus coming back again.

But Peter takes a strong stand arguing that God's apparent absence only demonstrates His patience. In other words, when God seems absent, He is most present. There is a fourth man in the fire, as Daniel Points out—unseen but present (Daniel 3:25). When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fire by King Nebuchadnezzar because they wouldn't bow down and worship the statue that was set up of the king, a 4th man appears **IN THE FIRE**. God doesn't transport them out or heal their pain when they get out, He protects them, **IN THE FIRE**. The last thing in the fire Christians should do is fall for the lie that God is absent. Such believers, Peter argues, ought to continue in their faith and good works, leading "lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (3:11-12). All well and good; easy for you to say, you might think. Much harder to actually do! Granted.

But what is the alternative? To throw up our hands in despair and say, "Okay, I thought there was a God and that He cared, but now I know I was mistaken."

Too easy! That is a cop out. Such a statement is not doubt but blindness. It is much more rigorous and honest to wrestle with our doubts and concede that sometimes we face unanswerable mysteries. It does not really matter whether our trial by fire is

spinal cancer or social ostracism, congestive heart failure or corrosive false teachings, personal pain or perplexity about the divine plan. In each of these ordeals, there are mysteries which defy a pat answer. For what both Reynolds Price and Peter tell us is that God is powerful, but unpredictable, and that He is concerned for our lives, but not likely to protect us from every form of suffering or stress. [NOTE 4]

God is sometimes quick to act and sometimes patient and long-suffering; able to reveal himself clearly, but also in mystery; willing to soothe our hurts, but also to let us learn from our mistakes; capable of judging harshly and decisively, but also lavish in His great and unexpected mercy. We must remember and hold on to the fact that God's love for us is unconditional and without limit!

Here's more: Peter, unlike Dr. Price, is writing to a community of believers. The point? We are not alone when we suffer. The church is familiar with suffering. For example: Miroslav Volf, a professor at Yale Divinity School, writes theology that is rooted in the church but speaks to the world. Profiled by Christianity Today as one of the five new theologians who articulate an unapologetically orthodox faith, Volf once taught seminary in Croatia during the wars that engulfed the former Yugoslavia. In the fall of 1992, his entire seminary had to escape from its home in Osijek to live in exile. Those years of warfare raised profound questions about how a Christian should live in a fractured world.

"I was very disturbed," he reflects, "how a whole set of non-violent commitments were thrown out of the window by some of my Christian friends on both sides when the war came. The commandment to love the enemy, which we practiced more or less in relation to the Communists, did not apply when the enemy was our Serbian or Croatian neighbor."

Soon the obvious slammed Volf on the head: (like my proverbial 2x4) this was not a Croatian issue—it's the dilemma of the church and the world. He has gone on to write a powerful meditation on Christian belief in antagonistic situations—Croatia, Los Angeles, France, San Bernardino, divided families—and it is clear that his perspective is shaped by his deep and personal concern for people in conflict. [NOTE 5]

Whatever we face, God desires the best for us. "It's not the nature of love to create and then annihilate," says the novelist Madeleine L'Engle. "If I believe God is love, then I have to believe that what has been made is going to go on being made."

The Christian mystic Julian of Norwich reminds us that our Lord never said: You will NOT be troubled, you will not be belabored, you will not be afflicted. But He said: You will not be **overcome**. Once atheist, turned Christian, the author of "The Chronicles of Narnia," wrote "God, who foresaw your tribulation, has specially armed you to go through it, not without pain but without stain."

Author Shawn Craig wrote in Christianity Today magazine, "Obedience to God's will does not mean everything will go smoothly, that the wind will always be at our backs and that the journey will be easy. Jesus told His disciples to cross to the other side of the lake, even though he knew the wind would be working against them. Despite the wind's contrariness, they struggled on because they knew they were doing his will."

[NOTE 6] In her commencement address in May of 1999 at Columbine High School, only one month after the shooting tragedy, senior Sara Martin compared the Columbine community to the stained-glass windows at an English chapel that was threatened by bombing in World War II. Area residents took the windows apart, numbered the pieces and—after the war—returned them and rebuilt the window. “The chapel made it through the war unharmed, but visible still between the replaced fragments of the windows are the lines where the pieces were broken and then put back together,” she said. We all are like a stained-glass window comprised of many pieces which sometimes must be protected, dismantled, and then put back together again. “It is our job to hear the message and recognize the pieces. We are created by the choices we make. Our window can be vibrant in color and spirit, a collection of the gifts given to us by our God and the people who surround us. Or our window can be blurred and colorless.”

Sara is right, there are always pieces to be saved. God’s fire may be fire, but it is a refiner’s fire, a purifying, strengthening, beautifying fire. And the life that goes through it, emerges now in this life as beautiful as a cathedral window in a beautiful sanctuary or church and will emerge in the next life as a crown jewel to the glory of God.

Sermon Notes for “Letter to a Man in the Fire” based on 2 Peter 3: 8-15a
Given at Voice of Hope Church on December 6th, 2015
Given at Doster Community Church on November 13th, 2022

- I. We all take our turn at “walking in the fire” and it is at those times that we wonder where God is. Jesus promised His followers, “I will never leave you nor forsake you!”
- II. Many people struggle with the questions, “Does God care?” and “Where is God when life hurts?”
- III. When we are going through the fire, living in pain, mourning and/or grieving a loss of some kind, we need to hear from God.
- IV. Life is messy and there are no pat answers for tough questions like, “Where is God when you need Him most? Or when life hurts?” God is unpredictable. Life is not all black and white no matter how much we want it to be.
- V. God never promises an absence of trouble, pain or frustration. But He does promise that we will NOT be overcome! We win in the end! Jesus has won the victory for us by defeating the devil, death, and hell. God desires the best for us! Jesus came that we might have a full and meaningful life (John 10:10).
- VI. What am I going to do about what I learned today? How will I change because of God’s message to me. Please write an “I will ...” statement.