



**Elect Exiles: 1 Peter
Arm Yourselves**

1 Peter 4:1-6
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¹Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ²so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. ³For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. ⁴With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

Introduction – No Light Temptation

“We just want the old Todd back.” That was what my two best friends in high school said to me on spring break my senior year of high school. They sat me down late one Friday night, we’re right in the midst of having fun in the sun on a senior year spring break, and they sat me down, looked me square in the face and said, “We just want the old version of you back.” You see, in high school and perhaps junior high, even as a little kid, I must confess I was a bit of a rebel rouser, a real trouble maker. And yet something happened. I came to the Lord Jesus Christ in the middle of my junior year of high school and God began doing something in me from the inside out; and I wasn’t the only one who began to notice. My friends at school began to notice, even my two best friends began to notice big time. But the problem was, they saw and knew the old Todd but now they saw this new Todd emerging as it were, right in the midst of the old Todd—this new creation that is coming forth in this person’s life. They began comparing the two and they liked the old Todd better. Many of us know and can relate to what I am talking about.

What do you think was the most intense challenge to me as a young Christian? It was not the intellectual challenges but the relational challenges of *being* a Christian. It wasn’t the objections to Christianity that were the challenge: evolutionary theory, the problem of pluralism, the problem of evil and how you come to terms with these massive intellectual objections. It wasn’t the objections to Christianity that was my problem; it was the objection to

my Christian life that was the most intense challenge! Why was that the most intense challenge? Because I have a craving in my heart that I think you share also—it's the craving, the longing to belong. It's what C. S. Lewis says in a wonderful essay entitled "Membership," it is "one of the dominant elements [in all of our lives] is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside."

Yet what happens when you are living out your Christian life is that you find yourself living with the tensions of this world. You find you are not so much in the inner ring any longer but on the outer ring of many relationships and friendships, perhaps even within the midst of your own family. You live with the tension of that in your workplace. You can't talk about your boss the way your colleagues do, and thus you are not in the inner ring. They might not even invite you out for lunch because they want to talk about the boss. You can't talk about your spouse at the play date on the block the way the other folks do. You spend your time differently, you spend your money differently, you no longer laugh at the jokes you used to. You no longer find entertaining the things you once did and thus you find yourself living with all these tensions as you try to live out your life in this world. Unless you flee from the world you're always going to have to live with all of these tensions. You are always going to be a hobbit amidst dwarves or you are going to be a dwarf amidst elves. There is going to be this obvious tension in your lives.

Do you know what tension this creates? It creates a temptation to *turn back* your commitment to Jesus Christ, or at least to *turn down* your commitment to Jesus Christ so that you can fly under the radar screen in the world and not be noticed. It's always been a temptation for the people of God. The distinctiveness of the Christian life draws attention, draws surprise. I'm not talking about weird, sub-cultural things about Christianity; I'm talking about distinctive character because you are following Christ. That distinctiveness has always drawn attention: surprise, shock and sometimes even scorn. Thus the temptation is to turn back from following Christ, particularly if you are a new believer, or to turn down your commitment from following Christ.

Perhaps you have been a believer for a long time; that is a temptation as well. The reality is that sometimes the follower of Jesus Christ just doesn't want to experience the heat of a distinctive way of life. So you get out of the proverbial kitchen. This, Friend, is exactly what Peter is speaking to in this passage: this temptation to turn back or to turn down your commitment to Christ because you don't want to face the heat of the distinctive lifestyle and the kind of challenge it's going to bring. Peter is addressing believers who have had a significant change of life. They were networked well with all their pagan compatriots, family members and work colleagues. Then something radical and profound happened to them, just like us—they were born again! And they began to change from the inside out. They began to find that they can no longer do, nor would they want to do, things they used to do.

See what happens to them in 1 Peter 4:4, "With respect to this," that is, these typical standard pagan practices in the first century world he referred to in verse 3, "they (all their pagan compatriots, family members, perhaps a spouse, a work colleague) are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery"—"That's not the old Todd. I'm surprised. He doesn't laugh at those jokes anymore. He is different, very different!" Surprised, shock and then, speaking against you—which is exactly what happens in verse 4 to these Christians—"and they malign you."

The surprise of a distinctive lifestyle will lead to people criticizing and speaking negatively of you because of the distinctiveness of your Christian commitment. This passage recognizes

that and calls you to be resolved to persevere despite the heat being turned up in your life. And so Peter says in verse 1, “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh,”—here is the call of the passage—“arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.” Jesus suffered in the flesh, you’ve got to arm yourselves with the same way of thinking; that is to say you’ve got to have the similar kind of resolve because when the heat is raised on a provocative, serious Christian life, you will be tempted to turn back or to turn it down. So God through Peter is saying, “arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.” That is, be resolved in your commitment to suffer for the sake of a distinctive Christian life.

You’re on the Right Path

The rest of the passage then provides encouragement to do that. Peter wants to encourage you: Arm yourselves, and let me give you some good reasons why you should do this, why you should be resolved, why you should fortify your heart and mind, why you should say, ‘This is standard, and I should be fortified and resolves in this.’ Peter gives us three encouragements along the way to help us be resolved in our walking after, with and pursuing Christ, even if it means receiving some heat. Here they are:

- Even though you are taking heat for a changed way of life, you are on the right path, not the wrong one. Stay on that path!
- Despite what others think about your changed life, there is something very good going on inside of you.
- Regardless of the criticism you may receive, they are not ultimately the last word. God ultimately has the last word about your life.

I want to look at each one of these encouragements with you as we see them in this passage. It is true, isn’t it, that whenever we receive resistance from family and friends in life, it causes us to wonder, ‘Perhaps I’m not on the right path.’ If I were to go home and say to my wife and my folks, ‘Hey, I’m thinking of resigning my post at the church and running for Congress; what do you think?’ I’d probably experience some resistance and it would cause me to say, ‘Is that the right path?’ Or if, on the way home, you were to say to your spouse, or child, or friend, ‘Hey, I’m thinking of selling my house, quitting my job and buying a Winnebago and driving around the western part of the United States for two years; what do you think?’ You might receive some resistance as well and it you may cause you to wonder, ‘Maybe the Winnebago is not such a good idea!’ You see what the problem is? When you experience resistance from friends and family for your changed way of life, it might cause you as well to wonder, ‘Am I on the right path?’

We experience this even among Christian relationships, don’t we? Even Christians sometimes can put resistance up to other Christians who are trying to pursue Jesus Christ more full on, and they push back and cause you to say, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t take that leap of faith. Maybe I shouldn’t move into the inner city because all my Christian friends are telling me that’s risky business. What about safety for the kids?’ The challenge, when we experience resistance from family and friends however is this: that you’re tempted to think that you are on the wrong path when actually, what it may mean is that you’re exactly on the right path! You are on the path Jesus Christ himself trod! This is Peter’s first encouragement in verse 1: “Since (or because) Christ suffered in the flesh,” he suffered in the flesh just the way you are suffering in the flesh, let this therefore encourage you to arm yourselves with the same way of thinking. If

you are taking heat for following God's will, you are on the right path. It's the path Jesus himself trod. Jesus definitely suffered in the flesh personally; he suffered persecution, he suffered martyrdom, he suffered death on a cross, an unjust and cruel execution indeed! Yet as you look at the life of Jesus, he also suffered socially: he suffered ostracism, he suffered from being not in the inner ring, but being outside, being excluded from the power position, being thought weird, being misunderstood and so on. This was predicted long ago of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah, many centuries before Jesus even arrived on the scene, foretells what life for the Messiah will be like.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:3)

He won't be in the in crowd; he won't be in the inner circle; he will be socially ostracized and spoken evil against. In the opening chapter of John's gospel it says of Jesus, "he was in the world and though the world was made through him"—imagine being in the world that you made and the world looks at you and says, 'Who's that joker?'—"yet the world did not know him" (Jn. 1:10). This is exactly what Jesus experienced. "He came to his own,"—he came to his own countrymen, the people of Israel, his own family and his own family did not receive him. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:8 "none of the rulers of this age understood this (who Jesus was)." It wasn't that the common folks didn't get Jesus but the sophisticated power brokers did. No, it was quite the opposite indeed. *None* of the rulers of this age understood who Jesus was!

Do you feel like nobody gets who you are as you work out in the world? Nobody got who Jesus was. If they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory, Paul says. Or, in 1 Peter chapter 2, the apostle Peter says that Jesus was the living stone, but was also the one who was rejected by men. You see, Jesus walked this path of social ostracism and criticism for following hard after the will of God. Jesus didn't pout about it. He didn't play the victim card nor should we. Can we not play victim cards and not pout? This is not a We're-so-beat-up-and-victimized-and-so-we-stand-strong stance. It is a way of embracing the costly consequences of discipleship and following Jesus. This is why Jesus said to his own disciples that if you are going to follow me, let me tell you what this is going to mean.

Perhaps you're here this morning and you have not made a commitment to follow Jesus Christ. You need to hear from Jesus himself about the cost of discipleship, the way in which following God significantly complicates your life—enriches it now, massively, forever and ever—but complicates it as well. And here's why; Jesus Christ himself puts it this way: "If the world hates you, (follower of me) know that it has hated me before it hated you." For "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." And so Jesus says, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'" (John 15:18-20).

I have taken heat for following God's will; so too, you will take heat wherever you are for following God's will, whether you are in the workplace, or in the playgroup on your neighborhood block, or at the Thanksgiving dinner with family as you get together to talk about things. Wherever it is, you will take heat; but don't take it as evidence that you are not on the right path but as evidence indeed that you *are* on the right path.

Something Good is going on Inside

Second encouragement: God's got something good going on inside of you. Not only are you on the right path, if you are taking heat for a distinctive Christian way of life, but God has something good inside of you. That is what taking heat reveals to you. Whenever a change of life is met with surprise, or shock or scorn, not only does it cause you to say, 'Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I should try another religion,' for example. It also causes us to question ourselves, 'Maybe I am actually doing something wrong? These people are not responding well to the way I am acting, the way I am different. Perhaps I am doing something wrong with my life.' And yet, here is where the temptation and misunderstanding can creep in. Here is where Peter's encouragement comes when you are experiencing heat for following after Christ.

It doesn't mean that you are doing something wrong; it means something very good is going on inside of you. Criticism for a changed life means you are actually converted! This is Peter's point in verse 1. He gives a little truism, a pithy statement: "Arm yourselves with the same way of thinking," Why? "for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God." He is saying if you are experiencing suffering that is criticism, it should remind you and reveal to you and affirm in your life, that you have actually been converted. Because here is the point: when you stop sinning in the way you would if you were apart from Christ, or before you knew Christ, if you stop sinning, other people will start criticizing. Read that as saying God is doing something profound and significant in your life: you are converted. Because if your conversion is real and God-given, if grace is really working in your life, if the Holy Spirit, God's presence has really taken up residence in you, your life will inevitably begin to change. Action by action, habit by habit other people will begin to notice.

So let me be crystal clear here and say that if your life is not receiving criticism of some kind, if people aren't responding to your life with some measure of surprise, (Wow, that's distinctive. I wouldn't have thought you would live like that. What is going on there?), if that's not going on in your life, pause and ask yourself: Am I really converted? Because if there is no distinctive lifestyle there may not be anything distinctive God has really done in your soul! So too, as we receive criticism, remember it's not a sign that we are doing something bad; it is a sign instead that God is doing something very good on the inside.

And so, my friends sat down with me and said, "We just want the old Todd back." I wasn't exactly sure how to respond. I hardly knew anything about theology—I'd hardly heard that word; I'd been a Christian for what seemed like a few days; I didn't know anything about the Bible. I did have one verse memorized. The guy who led me to the Lord said, "You ought to memorize this verse." And so, there as my old friends confront me, I didn't know what to say. So I went to get my bible and opened it to 2 Corinthians 5:17, the one verse that I knew: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." And they said, "Fair enough." And in that was an encouragement. Wow, I *am* the new Todd! I can't go back and there is no temptation to go back. This is confirmed by the word of God encouraging me. So too, some of you need to embrace that and to be resolved to press on in pursuing the will of God—and take heat for it. It will demonstrate to you and to others that you are a new creation! You're not on the wrong path. Something really good is going on inside of you if you take heat.

It's Not the Last Word

Thirdly and finally, it's not the last word if you take heat. It's temporary chatter about who you are. Sometimes when we receive criticism, it causes us to think maybe we are on the wrong path; maybe we are doing something wrong. Sometimes, it causes us to feel like it's the end of the world, especially when you receive criticism for following Christ from people that are very significant to you, like a spouse, or a mom or dad, or your two best friends in high school, or your neighbor. That word of critique or disapproval can be devastating, because their opinion matters to us, they love us and we love them. This is where we see this other powerful pull of the influential people in our lives as they speak either approvingly or disapprovingly of our life. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about. You have a mother or father who disapproves of the way you're living out your Christian life, and it is impeding your ability to follow Jesus fully because their word counts to you, perhaps even more significantly in your heart and mind than God's word of you.

This is the third and final encouragement Peter gives us: when you are receiving heat from other people, when they are maligning you, speaking negatively or ill about you, don't take that as the last word on your life. God has the last word. Don't take the world's verdict as the final verdict. God has the final verdict. In verses 4, 5 and 6, Peter makes this point: "With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you." They are speaking evil about you; words are being used to critique you. Verse 5 is the first point Peter says by way of encouragement, a sober word: "but they (who are speaking ill of you) will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." The point: slanderers of you because you are following the will of God will one day be finally silenced. Verse 6: sufferers for the sake of Christ will eventually be vindicated, "For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does"—a curious verse. The point is: God will vindicate you as you follow after him. He will cause you to live in the spirit, he will raise you from the dead in vindication and you will receive there the definitive, final and last word on your life.

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, take heart. Take strength and encouragement from these 3 words of encouragement, that you are not on the wrong path when receiving criticism, you are on the right path. Second, despite what others say about what you are doing or think about what is going on in your life, God is doing something very, very good inside of you. Third, God alone has the last word on your life.

A couple of comments and then I will close. This passage has particular relevance to you if you're a young person, a student or young adult, college age or high school age. Why? Because at that age in your life, peer pressure is massive. At that point in your life, the way other people perceive you has a massive impact on the way you perceive yourself. Thus their opinion, whether it's approving or disapproving, can have a huge influence in your life. My appeal and encouragement to you if you are a student, high school age, college age or young adult where the peer group pressure is significant, is to lay hold of these three encouragements, because without resolving to take a little heat in following Christ you will never pursue Christ fully with your life.

Secondly, to the newer Christians in our midst: you are coming out of a network of relationships and you are perhaps experiencing this very kind of heat that I am describing precisely because your life is being transformed while you are in the midst of all of these other relationships with people who are not following Jesus the way you are. Let me encourage you similarly to lay hold of these three encouragements; you are on the right path; hang on, stick with it, God is doing something very good inside of you. Persevere in it.

Lastly to all of us, this passage is a good diagnostic to us to ask: how am I being received by my friends and those with whom I work or live or do life. Am I being received really well? In one sense, that is great, but is there any element of surprise I detect in their eyes as they look at my life? Or is my life just as predictable as their life is and there is no sense of surprise. It's a good diagnostic, the Christian life, if it is a life that is really pursuing Christ, will have an element of surprise to it.

Billy Graham was once invited to play golf with President Gerald Ford and two other PGA professional golfers. They had their round of golf and after they were done, some of the other pros asked "How was it to play with Ford and Billy Graham?" The golfer who had gone out with Ford and Graham launched into the question at a bit of a tirade and said to this effect, "I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat," and stomped off. His friend followed him and after the emotion had subsided, asked, "Wow, what happened? Was Billy Graham a little rough on you out there on the golf course?" to which the other pro sighed somewhat embarrassingly and said, "No, he didn't even mention religion. I just had a bad round of golf." To come under the convicting presence of a person who is living a godly life, without even saying a word. That's the reality of following hard after the Lord Jesus Christ. We as followers of Jesus need to be resolved and arm ourselves with that fact, and remember that while some may respond with anger and suspicion, others will be attracted to that life and come to know Jesus Christ as our life radiates out his love and his gospel to them. May that be true for you and for me!

Amen.

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