

# A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

## 1 PETER 4:1-11

I'm sure you've heard the expression - "*A blessing in disguise.*" It's *a good thing* - that initially looks like *a bad thing* - that ends up *a good thing*.

You break your arm, only to fall in love with the hospital nurse.

You get laid off, but end up finding a better job with higher pay.

You go to the doctor to have him check out a minor ailment, and he discovers a life-threatening illness that would've gone undiagnosed.

You don't have the grades to get into a particular college, so you're forced into another field that ends up a better fit for you and your talents.

You get busted on a DUI, but it forces you to finally give up drinking.

At first, *the broken arm... the untimely lay-off... the bothersome ailment... the personal rejection... the embarrassing arrest...* is thought to be a bad thing, but then a God thing happens, and it turns into a good thing.

We call it, "*a blessing in disguise!*"

Nineteenth century author and poet, Oscar Wilde, once wrote "*What seems to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.*"

A more contemporary poet, Canadian crooner Bryan Adams sings, “Are you lonely? Are you crying? Are those teardrops in your eyes? Is it more blues, is it bad news... Is it a curse, or a blessing in disguise? It's the scars that make you stronger. It's the hard times that make you wise. It's the sweet things that only time brings - that arrive like a blessing in disguise.”

This past week, **July 6<sup>th</sup>** was an important anniversary. In the Czech Republic, Tuesday was a national holiday. And to understand why, we need to backtrack six centuries, to the German city of Constance.

The year is 1415... and for 8 months now John Hus, the Czech reformer has occupied a prison cell. Hus dared to stand up to the wrongs he saw in the Catholic Church. He was condemned to die, and stuffed in a cell where he awaited certain martyrdom. There, he wrote out a prayer...

“O most holy Christ, draw me, weak as I am, after Yourself, for if you don't draw us we cannot follow You. Strengthen my spirit, that it may be willing... Let Your grace precede us... for without You we cannot go... to cruel death. Give me a fearless heart, a right faith, a firm hope, a perfect love, that for Your sake I may lay down my life with patience and joy.”

The next day, July 6, was the day of John Hus' burning. *He was taken to the execution site - stripped of his clothes - his hands were tied behind his back - his neck*

*chained to a wooden stake.* He was covered with sticks and straw. Hus was then given a final opportunity to recant his faith...

Yet the brave believer replied, **"God is my witness... In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached; I will die today with gladness."** *And with that...* the torch was lit! John Hus was burned at the stake for Jesus' sake - and his ashes were thrown into the nearby Rhine.

If you're like me, you like God's promises. You love to claim them! **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** There're the two promises in Philippians... **"God shall supply all your need..."** And the often-quoted promise, **"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."**

When I sin, I'm quick to repeat God's promise to the Romans, **"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus..."**

Christians love to rely on God's promises.

But there's one promise we're not so fond of reciting - yet it's a God-given promise nonetheless. 2 Timothy 3:12 reads, **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."** Live a godly life and God promises at some point you'll end up scorned, ridiculed, and persecuted.

Unlike John Hus you may not be burned at the stake, or called on to die for Jesus sake, but the cost of following Jesus is billed to us in many ways.

Stop laughing at dirty jokes, and using foul language, and your buddies will want to know why you're no fun anymore... Stop frequenting the bar, and they'll snicker behind your back... Refuse to fudge on expense reports, and you'll get snubbed by coworkers... Tell your girlfriend or boyfriend you've decided to reserve sex for marriage, and you'll be misunderstood...

Stop cheating on tests and your friends will get convicted and stop hanging out... Stop lying to clients and your boss might question your loyalty... Stand up for Jesus in the classroom and your heathen professor might try to humiliate you in front of your peers... Live out your faith at home and your unbelieving spouse could try to make your life more difficult.

Decide to be a serious Christian and you'll stop getting invited to the parties... You'll get ignored and ostracized... You'll lose a client... Or get fired from a job... Your stand for Jesus might even cost you a friendship...

The second century saint, Tertullian, a disciple of the Apostle Peter, was once approached by a man who posed a soul-searching question.

He asked Tertullian, "I have come to Christ, but I don't know what to do. I have a job that I don't think is consistent with what Scripture teaches. What can I do? *I must live.*" Tertullian answered the fellow, "*Must you?*"

There's nothing worth denying our Lord Jesus – *not even life itself!*

Here's what we learn in the first half of 1 Peter 4 – suffering and persecution for Jesus sake is *a blessing in disguise* if we approach it and endure it with the right attitude. Peter's readers were starting to feel the heat. They weren't yet dying for their faith, but their suffering was increasing – and Peter wanted to arm them with the right attitude.

This was John Hus' desire. He prayed for the right attitude toward suffering. He prayed for strength and grace. I love his prayer, “Give me a fearless heart, a right faith, a firm hope, a perfect love, that for Your sake I may lay down my life with patience and joy.”

According to God's promises suffering is a given. It's not an “if,” but a “when.” Persecution isn't a “how come” – it's a “how” and a “how much.”

Whether God calls on us to suffer in *big ways* or *little ways* we need to be ready. 1Peter 4 is to believers who are under the gun. Peter teaches them and us, four truths that turns persecution into *a blessing in disguise*.

Verse 1 begins, “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind...” When you're attacked by hostile forces you need to be armed! Peter says “arm yourselves...” *but how?*

Does a Christian need to pack a rod? Or take Tae-kwon-do? Should I be carrying a canister of mace in my pocket? *No, no, and no!*

A *pistol*, or a *punch*, or a *poison* might help against a random act of violence. But when it comes to persecution for Jesus' sake, Peter says I need to arm myself with a mindset. ***“Arm yourselves...with the same mind.”***

Jesus suffered for us in the flesh – and He did so for multiple reasons – but one of which was to teach us to suffer for His sake - *and to do it well!*

Peter is instructing us, that when we're mocked and maligned for Jesus' sake, or discriminated against for righteousness sake - we need to be locked and loaded with the same attitude our Lord displayed on the cross.

Here's Principle #1, verse 1, ***“For he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin...”*** Why is suffering *a blessing in disguise? Persecution has a purifying effect.* It *purifies our ranks*, and it *purifies our hearts*.

Once you've walked with Jesus to the point of suffering there are certain sins and temptations that no longer have a pull on you. *You're out of their reach... you've gone too far... invested too much... you're in too deep.*

Persecution marks a defining line - a point of no return in a person's life.

In the prelude to the Civil War there were families in Virginia and Kentucky – *“the border states”* – that thought they could preserve their neutrality. They didn't want to fight for either side - North or South. But when the fighting began... suddenly, these folks were forced to choose...

It's easy to straddle a fence, until the fence becomes part of a war zone.

When the led starts flying you've got to get off the fence, and decided where you belong? This is what happens when Christians get persecuted.

When persecution breaks out fence-setters come down on one side or the other. Either they follow Jesus with their whole heart, *come what may*.

Or they tuck tail and deny Him. In a war zone nobody plays at religion any more. Faith is now serious, deadly business - a purity results...

For a suffering church there's no more gray... it's black or white. No more lukewarm... it's hot or cold. Persecution ups the ante! It crystallizes our commitment. It intensifies our devotion. It forces us to take a stand.

As Peter puts it, "he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin."

Persecution separates *the pretenders* from *the contenders*.

If we approach a fiery trial with the right attitude it purifies our motives - and streamlines our priorities - and enflames our passion for Jesus.

Persecution raises the stakes, and elevates our commitment.

For a serious believer who truly wants to be all he or she can be for Jesus' sake, persecution can actually become *a blessing in disguise*.

In verse 2 Peter speaks to the Christian who's being persecuted, **"that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."** Once you've paid a heavy price for following Jesus, then there's no turning back... *It's like trying to swim across a lake...*

There's safety on the shore... Walk out to the end of the dock and turn back if something goes wrong... Even after you dive in you're still a lot closer to the dock than you are to the other shore... If something goes wrong it's still easier to turn back than it is to press on...

But if you keep swimming there comes a point where logic dictates - *it's the other shore or bust!* Now it's easier to keep swimming and dog-paddling than it is to turn back. Retreat is no longer a viable option.

This is what happens when a believer endures persecution.

If a new Christian runs into some resistance, they're tempted to turn back. It's so easy to rejoin the pack, and escape into selfish pleasures.

But once you've been persecuted for your faith – once it's cost you something – a price has been paid – an investment has been made – *there's no going back*. You're eyes and heart is fixed on the other shore.



Once you share in Christ's sufferings the die is cast. You'll drown before you turn back. Your goal is to make the other shore. *It's heaven or bust.*

Several years ago, in communist controlled Laos and Cambodia, church members were told to fill out a card. According to *World Evangelism Fellowship* it read... "I (*your name*), who live in (*your town*) believe in a foreign religion, which the imperialists have used for their own benefit to divide the unified front and to build power for themselves against the local authorities. Now, I and my family clearly see the intentions of the enemy and regret the deeds which we have committed. We have clearly seen the goodness of the Party and the Government. Therefore, I and my family voluntarily and unequivocally resign from believing in this foreign religion."

If you sign that card your family can live in peace and safety. Your kids can go to school without being hassled. Your wife doesn't have to look over her shoulder every time she ventures out into a public place.

But don't sign that card and you can expect harassment, humiliation, and persecution for you and your family – maybe even prison and torture.

Would you sign or would you not sign?

There's one surety, signing that card will mark a point of no return.

Once you sign, your commitment to Jesus is locked in. Your devotion has been radicalized. Now you're a

follower of Jesus, no matter what. That's why I say persecution is *a blessing in disguise* - it purifies our faith.

But there's another principle in verse 3, "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles - when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries." Here's Principle #2 – **persecution sharpens our perspective.**

When it costs us something tangible to live for Jesus, everything about our faith becomes more valuable - while the lusts of the flesh seem cheap. Peter says a sufferer gains a sharper perspective on what really matters...

Haven't you wasted enough time, and life, and money indulging in fleshly, selfish pleasures? Most folks live for the weekend high – a buzz here, a buzz there – they throw away life on what's fleeting and superficial.

Why not live your one-and-only-life for Jesus? Invest it in forever. Suffering is *a blessing in disguise* when we see *now* in light of *eternity*.

In times of peace and tranquility we as believers can get the false impression that this world is really our friend. We forget what it did to Jesus.

We assume it's changed its colors. We start to view the world as our ally. We feel at home. We get comfortable. We snuggle up to the world.

That's when persecution wakes us up! It slaps us upside the head and opens our eyes! The world takes off its disguise and reveals its fangs.

This world has always been hostile to God and to the things of God. Never forget it hated and butchered Jesus. *Our only home is heaven.* There's no real peace and acceptance in this world for followers of Jesus.

At times we might be tolerated, but we'll never truly be embraced.

Note verse 4 mentions people of this world. Peter calls them "*Gentiles.*"

He uses the term not in a racial sense, but in a religious sense. The "*Gentiles*" are unbelievers, pagans – people lost without God in their lives.

They're your old friends – the good ole boys – your homies – your party pals – the gang – the crew – your wingman... But notice what Peter says about them, "*In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.*"

Your former friends are caught up in a "*flood of dissipation.*" The phrase means "*out-of-control.*" Rather than live a focused life, they drift like an animal. If it feels good, or tastes good, or looks good - that's how they roll.

They lack restraint – direction – conviction. There's no higher purpose.

And this is why they're not going to understand your commitment to Jesus. They march to a different drummer. They hang with another posse.

And even though they might respect you, they'll probably never say so.

In fact, it won't take long before you start to hear the put downs... "He's a bore." "She used to be cool." He's a Jesus freak." "She's a do-gooder."

When my daughter stood up to one of her college roommates, and said she wouldn't approve of the girl's boyfriend spending the night in their apartment – the girl scolded Natalie, "*You just need to grow up!*"

When the same girl decided to move to another apartment she made sure Natalie heard her parting shot, "*I want to room with some cool kids.*"

At the time I made sure my daughter knew that's what was said on earth... *that's not what was said in heaven!* Her Lord had a whole different take on the situation. Jesus wanted Natalie to know that He was proud of the stand she'd taken. In the halls of heaven she was one of the cool kids!

Here's what you remember when you're laughed at for Jesus' sake... *Jesus will get the last laugh!* In the end, the joke is on the mockers...

Peter says in verse 5, "**They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.**" Remember

whose definition of “cool” ultimately prevails. Many people this world calls “cool” will end up in hell!

And trust me, there’s nothing “cool” about hanging out in the fires of hell.

Verse 6 goes on to explain the criteria by which all men are judged. “For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead...”

The Gospel was preached even in the OT. If not in detail, it was always conveyed in seed form. In other words, the name “Jesus” may not have been mentioned, but God had always promised His people a deliverer...

In verse 6 Peter says the terms of salvation for all men are identical, “that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” The spirits of folks who once lived, and people alive today – the “men in the flesh” – are all judged by the same criteria – *faith*.

People who are dead and gone are judged by the same standard as those alive in Peter’s day - and those alive today. *It all boils down to faith!*

Persecution can be *a blessing in disguise*. It has a purifying effect. It sharpens our perspective – but here’s Principle #3, **persecution makes the rapture of the church a more present, and real, and longed for reality**. In verse 7 Peter writes, “But the end of all things is at hand...”

When your relationship with this world sours, and you realize this earth is not a friendly place. It makes going home a far more pleasant prospect.

Let's say you're on a vacation in the Bahamas. You're having fun. Snorkeling, and sunbathing, and swimming, and wind-surfing – it's a blast.

But one day you hear that a hurricane is brewing out in the Caribbean. *That's still a long way off...* You hear the weather report. You acknowledge the possibility – but you're having way too much fun to want to go home...

Until the wind picks up – and the drizzle starts. The sea gets rough and waves crash. Once you *feel the storm* your attitude changes. All of a sudden, you can't wait to board an airplane and get back to the mainland.

This is why persecution is *a blessing in disguise*. It wakes us up to the storms ahead. This world has a court date. It'll be judged by God.

When we're persecuted we *feel* the conflict. Life on Earth is no longer fun. Our flirtation with it ends, and we long for Jesus to take us home.

Persecution **purifies** - sharpens **perspective** - the rapture seems a more **present reality**. And Principle #4, **persecution intensifies our prayer life**. Peter adds in verse 7, **"therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers."**

As long as the sun is shining in the Bahamas, who cares about what's happening back home. You haven't even thought about a return flight.

But when that hurricane starts barreling down on your spot in the ocean you're on the phone... daily, even hourly... you're calling the local airport - the airline back in the states. You're making sure your flight is on time - there's seats available - that you're going to have no problem boarding.

Suddenly the need for communication is very, very strategic.

This is what happens to a persecuted believer's prayer life.

As the world gets more hostile - staying in touch with heaven and your Savior becomes more and more vital. *In peaceful times we tend to think prayer is an option – under persecution we know prayer is an imperative.*

And the intensity you pick up in *prayer* also happens toward *people*.

Here's Principle #5, **persecution causes us to pull together with other believers in more meaningful relationships.** When you're hated and rejected by this world you need to bond with believers who love Jesus.

When you're belittled for Jesus sake, it's easier to spot your true friends.

And they're usually not fraternity brothers, or teammates, or coworkers. They're fellow believers – brothers and

sisters in Christ. Persecution is *a blessing in disguise* since it causes us to strengthen ties with God's family.

If you're a freshman heading to college this fall here's [Survival 101](#).

The moment you arrive on campus find some fellow believers - lock hearts - create some meaningful relationships. If not immediately, then soon, you'll need a Christian friend. It's up to you to take a stand - but while standing it's always nice if there's a few brothers who have your back.

You're going to run into a hostile professor who'll try to shatter your faith. You're going to be tempted, and when you say "no," you'll be shunned.

If you're committed to following Jesus you're going to be left hanging.

Look to the cross, Jesus was left hanging. The difference is Jesus hung alone. He desires for His followers to hang out with each other!

The church is never tighter – believers are never more united – our love for one another is never stronger than when we suffer together for Jesus.

This makes persecution a blessing in disguise.

Persecuted believers don't squabble over the fine print of their theology.

Its interesting Christianity's great church councils where the details of our faith were hammered out didn't occur



until 300 years after our founding. *Why?* It's because the Church spent its first 3 centuries under persecution, fighting to survive. Christians lacked the time and energy to argue doctrine.

When you're at war with the culture and the world around you the priority within the church is to love each other. That's why Peter says in verse 8, **“And above all things have fervent love for one another...”**

In a suffering church people don't hold on to petty differences – they don't squabble over nonessential issues – they don't hold grudges and get bitter. They love each other sincerely, and eagerly, and sacrificially.

Note what Peter says about love – he quotes Proverbs 10:12, **“For ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’”** In serving God love makes up for other deficiencies. Love covers a lack of talent, or knowledge, or experience.

In HS we had a kid on our baseball team who could hit. *For average, with power...* wow, he could hit. He couldn't catch a fly ball with a 10 foot net... but he could hit. Every time a ball came his way we cringed, but he made up for it with his bat. In those days there was no designated hitter, but when our coach made up the line-up the kid was in it, because he hit.

My coach believed in the verse, **“hitting covers a multitude of errors.”**

And I'll let you in on a little secret. God feels the same way. If you want to be in God's line-up every day, every year – if you want to play on God's team - learn to love like Jesus loves! It doesn't matter if you're not the most skilled – or if you're error prone – if you can love, you can play for God.

The Holy Spirit packs His line-up with heavy-hitting lovers... "Love will cover a multitude of sins." In all times, the church needs to major on love.

Peter continues this priority of people. He says, "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling." Hospitality is love's first impression.

The best way to demonstrate an *open heart* is by *opening a door* – even *opening your home*... Peter writes to persecuted believers - *turned out* by the world. He wants them to know they can *turn in* to the Church.

Persecuted people discover the hard way this world is not their home.

Heaven is home. But between now and heaven we need a home away from home. That's the role of the church! And hospitality is a vital gift for a suffering church. *Let's go out of our way to provide each other a home...*

Verse 10 takes it a step further, "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

God gives each believer a spiritual gift, and we need to use our gifts! When it comes to the gifts of the Spirit here's the rule... *use it or lose it.*

And remember the gift he's just mentioned – **the gift of hospitality.**

Here's a spiritual gift that often gets neglected. Some folks have a supernatural knack for making people feel at home, and loved, and wanted.

Hospitality is a wonderful, beautiful gift - *but it's not the only spiritual gift.*

Peter tells us in verse 11, **“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”**

Peter lists two more gifts – **speaking God's oracles** – and **ministry.** God provides people with the abilities of *communication* and *organization.*

And these are also gifts particularly applicable to a persecuted church.

When you suffer behind enemy lines you really want to hear from headquarters... And after you've been scattered you need to get reorganize... *If you have these gifts use them.* When persecution raises its ugly head it's crucial that Christians come together in encouraging ways.

If Peter were here today he'd tell us, though nobody wants it or would ever ask to be *burned at the stake* like John Hus – or more likely for us, *roasted with words* – still a little persecution can be good for our faith...

*It has a purifying effect...*

*It sharpens our perspective...*

*It increases our longing for Jesus and heaven....*

*It deepens our prayer life...*

*And it causes us to pull together and share our gifts with one another...*

None of us wants to suffer, but we all need to arm ourselves with the mind of Jesus - so that when persecution does strike we can approach it in a way that glorifies God! Let's make sure our suffering ends up *a blessing in disguise!*