

Introduction

Good morning HNW! Full disclosure... I've had a man-crush on your pastor since I first met him... (Laughter) The doctors will tell us that Steve has a weak heart... but spiritually it's as strong and beautiful a heart as I've ever seen. I'm praying every day that we will have the opportunity to celebrate when his heart becomes physically as strong as it is spiritually. I love your staff, and I appreciate you guys. As Steve said, I live in the community. I'm just up 249 a little ways, in Lakewood Grove. I appreciate the ministry that HNW does in our community because you make our community a better place to live. You are the hands and arms of God, and I am grateful for everything that you do. I'm looking forward to Houston being a little bit more like heaven as the vision and ministry of HNW grows.

I don't know about you, but God uses family and friends in my life to teach me a lot about Himself. Can any of you relate to that? One of these incidences happened a few years ago when my youngest son and I were going out to play baseball in our backyard. On the way out, I asked him, "Andrew, who do you think is going to win today?" He said, "Me"...without even thinking. So I pause for a minute and think to myself, "Maybe I've let this go a little bit too far." So I asked him, "Andrew, who do you really think is the better baseball player... me or you?" And he said, "Dad... I win all the time." (Laughter) So that clarified it for me. It was time to pull the veil back a little bit... to let him see a little bit more who his Dad actually was. So we walk out in the backyard and I asked him, "Andrew... do you think Dad can hit the ball over the fence?" He shrugs his shoulders and said, "You never have..." Now we live in a subdivision... it's not a large yard. (Laughter) So I said, "Andrew, do you think Dad could hit the ball not only over the fence but over the house beyond the fence?" He says, "No way." That was just beyond his imagination. So I asked my son to step into the middle of the yard and to pitch me the ball. And by God's grace, I did not hit a ground ball... but I caught this and the ball soared up out of sight over that house, and my 5-year-old son, standing in the middle of our yard... his jaw down around his waist, just going, "Wow....." He would never see his Dad in the same light again. So later that evening, I am reflecting on what had happened. It was as if God sat down next to me and said, "Galen, how often do you see God as Andrew saw you... only able to do that which you have seen Me do?" I'm starting to feel a little bit convicted, and then God says this to me. "Do you want Me to wow you?"

That's one of the really cool things about our Savior; He wants to wow us each and every day. He wants to pull the veil back for us and have us see a little more clearly who He is... to bring His person into focus so that our hearts are drawn to Him in a deeper and deeper way. One of the ways that God wants to wow all of us is in how well we handle persecution and how well we continue to love in the face of loss. We are in the midst of a study of First Peter entitled "Tested." And Peter is writing right around AD 64. Actually Rome burned in AD 64. Nero pinned the fire on Christians, and it gave him the perfect opportunity to increase the persecution of the people that he was already sceptical of because they would only worship Jesus. So Nero became notorious for his persecution of Christians. One of the ways he would kill Christians is he would immerse them in tar and then use them as human torches to light his gardens at night. He lined streets with crosses and crucified believers. He entertained himself by feeding Christians to wild animals. Peter is writing to prepare the Church, the people of God who lived in Roman regions, for this coming persecution that was on the horizon. He wanted them to be prepared or to develop a new perspective on the spiritual purpose and prosperity of suffering. Peter wants the Church to know that persecution is promised to all believers, but the persecution also holds promise for all believers. He wants to help them learn to live triumphantly, victoriously, in the face of hostility.

So if you have your Bibles today, open them with them with me to First Peter chapter 4. This morning we are looking at verses 12 through 19 ...a message that I've entitled "Persecution's Promise." The Word of the Lord: *"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. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the Gospel of God? And*

'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'

"Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."

Please pray with me. "Lord, this is a very countercultural message. It's a truth that is hard to open our hearts to receive. God, I pray that You would give us the grace to hear Your Spirit and allow You to plant this transformational truth deeply in our spirits, that it might bear fruit and absolutely astonish us with Your work in our lives and how well we learn to walk and love in the face of suffering. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Peter begins this paragraph by making it absolutely clear. He wanted there to be no misunderstanding that testing is a part of every Christian's maturation journey... that it is a part of God's working in our lives to transform us into His image. And he didn't want anyone to have any false expectations... that following Christ didn't involve carrying a cross. So he begins by letting us know that persecution is to be expected in our lives. He says this in verse 12: *"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."*

James, in his epistle in chapter 1 [verses 2-4], wrote these words, *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."* We want the perfection without the persecution. We want the sanctification without the suffering. Paul says it this way in Philippians chapter 1 [verse 29]. He says, *"For it has been granted to you for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake."* Jesus declared in His very first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:10, these words: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

1. Persecution Is To Be Expected. (v. 12)

You know, it's hard to wrap our arms around this truth... that there are going to be people who hate you and want to hurt you simply because of your faith, because you are a Christian. When you carry light into the darkness, the Scripture says that many men will love darkness more than light. They are not going to appreciate the Gospel. They are not going to appreciate your ministry. As much as I understood that the Scripture taught this and that it was true, the first time this kind of hate actually found me, I was still kind of taken back. We were church planting in south Orlando, and it was really our heart to reach out to high-risk kids. So one of the things we did as a ministry is we opened a community resource center. On Friday and

Saturday nights, it became a rap café. We invited youth to come and perform with state-of-the-art equipment and to invite their friends to hear them rap. They had to clean it up... (Laughter) but it was wildly successful. Our community center could hold about 150 kids. The first night, we had 600 kids show up. The line literally wrapped around the shopping plaza. We were caught a little bit off guard. And then when the evening started, the owner of the business next door, which was kind of a Cheers-style neighborhood bar, came knocking on our door saying, "Would you please turn the music down..." It is kind of funny that it's the bar asking the Church to lower the volume on what they were doing. So we did all we could to be good neighbors. We understood that the plaza had been overwhelmed, and his patrons didn't have a place to park. So we blocked off parking for his patrons. We hired security. We did everything that we could to make this a positive experience. About two months into this ministry, one of his patrons, when leaving the bar about 2 in the morning was carjacked, and he was beaten to within an inch of his life. He lost an eye and was in the hospital for months. We were all broken-hearted. But his bar family held the Church responsible. They were really upset that we had invited these rebel youth into their neighborhood, and that we had disrupted the peace that was theirs. So they sued us and did everything they could to take everything that we had. They began to cuss me out every time they saw me, no matter where it was in the community. They made it their nightly ritual to leave the bar and spit on our window. So every morning I would arrive and I'd clean the windows of that. They sliced our tires; they sent us death threats. It became so abusive that the police finally came to us and said, "You know, it would probably be best to push pause on this ministry for a while... because we don't know what these people will do." The truth is, when you start to follow the ministry that God calls you into, whether it's your neighborhood or your workplace, there are going to be people that don't appreciate it... that don't like it. Christ wants you to be aware of that and don't be caught off guard. Don't be surprised when people push back against the good, against the Gospel, against the Spirit's work in your life and in your neighborhood.

2. Persecution Is To Be Embraced (vv. 13-14)

He goes on to say this: "Not only should we not be surprised but we should expect it... but we also ought to have a heart to embrace it rather than to seek to escape it." Look at verses 13 and 14; they say this... *"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."* Persecution delivers, for the Christian, fulfillment. There is a fruit in it that comes when you are persecuted.

Now, let me try to help you get your arms around what Peter is saying here. How many of you have ever gone on a diet? Do I have any dieters out there? Yeah... most all of us. Now there is very little pleasure... there is very little rejoicing in denying yourself your favorite foods and your portion size being the size of an appetizer. That is not fun. The joy comes when you step on the scale... and the pounds start to leave you. Even more so when the inches start to melt away, and your health starts to return. How many have had this rejoice-full moment, when you finally look down and you can see your toes again? That's exciting. It's nice to be able to tie your shoes and not run out of breath because your gut has been pushed up into your lungs. We know this; there is no pleasure in dieting. The pleasure... the joy... comes in what the diet produces in your life. This is what Peter is wanting Christians to understand. He is not trying to tell you that suffering doesn't suck. It just does. (Laughter) There is no joy in the suffering itself, but there is joy in what God is wanting to do in your life. ...because through it He releases the fruit of the Spirit that allows you to live above your circumstances. It's a work of God that is done from the inside out that allows you to know love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, patience, self-control. All the things that we want are taken hold of through the porthole of persecution. There is a joy; there is a fulfillment that comes in persecution.

Peter says this. He says, not only do you rejoice in it, but when Jesus returns, there is really going to be a party. You are really going to enjoy it. There is even benefit this side of heaven for that. How many of you realize that there is, in being ready for something, an anticipation. There is an energy; there is an enthusiasm that comes with that. But when you're not, there is an anxiety. When you live your life not prepared to stand before Jesus, if He were to call you home today or He decides to come to earth... If you're not ready, there is not the peace that God wants you to know. There's not the excitement that God wants you to live with in that coming reunion that is supposed to energize us and excite us and fill us with a hope that allows us to live above the circumstances of life.

So persecution not only delivers for us a fulfillment of fruit in our life, but it also delivers a fellowship. Read with me what Peter says in verse 14: *"If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."* Paul said this in Philippians 3:10. He said, *"...that you might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."* There is a depth of fellowship that comes through persecution, through suffering, through trials that nothing else can deliver.

I saw the reality of this the first time in people's lives when I had the privilege to travel into the former Soviet Union right after the iron curtain had fallen. I was training a group of pastors. One of the real joys of that trip was to hear them talk about the persecution that they had to endure, living in a communist country. One of the pastors, Sergei, was sharing his story about the days and weeks that he spent in solitary confinement, he began to weep telling the story. He says, "Pastor, these are not tears of sorrow but tears of joy about the intimate fellowship I had with Jesus during those times of confinement." He says, "I kept expecting the guards to ask me who was in the cell with me." He had his own Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fiery furnace experience. As I heard this testimony over and over again, I began to think to myself, "This is beyond my experience." As much as I've sought to walk with God, I've never known that kind of intimacy... that kind of an incarnation of God's presence and purpose in my life... that depth of intimacy. It lit in me a fire to want to go there. I had to confess to them. I said, "You know, honestly, I don't even know that I have a faith, that if asked to walk through the same circumstances you have that I would do it with such grace. They reminded me, "Pastor, you don't need to be concerned because God says, 'His grace is sufficient in time of need.'"

As we look at the trouble or we look at the struggle or even hear the journey that Gilbert made, and we say, I don't know if I could do that." Don't be overcome because the grace that God requires in those situations comes to you when needed... in the midst of the struggle. So Peter is encouraging a Church that was on the edge of being horribly persecuted that you can find promise in persecution because in it there is a fulfillment. There is a connection to the fruit of the Spirit. There is an intimacy and a fellowship with God that makes us welcome the persecution... that allows us to see it as a privilege rather than a problem... as an honor over a horror. Our hope is that we would be as faithful as the Christians that Peter wrote to in the early Church.

3. Persecution Is To Be Examined. (vv. 15, 18)

He goes on and he says this. He reminds us that not all persecution holds this same promise. So, in First Peter chapter 4, verses 15 and 18, he challenges us to examine the persecution to be sure that it's not self-inflicted but Spirit-initiated. In verse 15 he says this... *"But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler."* The truth is this: sometimes suffering finds us simply because we have made poor choices. It's not hard for us to understand that if you murder someone and you go to prison, that's the

consequence of your actions. That if you steal and you find yourself in jail, that's kind of on you... that if you sow evil and people push back, that's to be expected. But you know I was a little bit surprised as I began to study this, that Peter groups murderers and meddlers in the same category. ...That a murderer who claims to be a Christian could do as much damage to the cause of Christ as a meddler. I said, "I need to press into this a little bit more and see, 'What is he talking about?'"

It's interesting. In doing a word study, this is the only place in the New Testament that this word is used. The word literally means "one who meddles in something alien to their calling." It's to be an agitator. Now here is the truth. Peter, in the paragraph just before that Steve preached on last week, had just challenged believers to minister in their gifting and under the strength of the Spirit. So what he is saying is this... when you step outside of the calling on your life or you start to minister in your own strength rather in the Spirit's strength, you've moved from ministry to meddling. You've moved outside of the lane that God has called you to run into. Instead of doing good, you can bring harm to the cause of Christ. We've all met these well-intended Christians who take it upon themselves to be the Holy Spirit in your life. Peter is saying, "Don't do that because that irritates people. And instead of turning people to Christ, you are going to turn them away from you." He is challenging them to stay true to what God has asked them to do and nothing else. We are meddlers when our passion for ministry outpaces God's plans... when we become more excited about producing results than trusting God to bear them. We become meddlers. This is the shocking news... that Peter is saying that can be as damaging to the cause of Christ as a Christian who murders. Meddlers and murderers tarnish the glory of God. ...Because people see rules and regulations over a relationship. The message of the Gospel is clouded. The grace of God is presented through guilt over grace. We become more legalistic than loving. We become the clanging gong in First Corinthians that Paul warns us about being. We become more of a problem than anything else. So Peter says that you can invite persecution into your own life by being a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler... running ahead of God and not staying in pace with Him. Self-inflicted persecution does not hold promise, but God-initiated persecution does.

Peter writes these words then for us in verses 16 and 18. He says this: *"Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."* If it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the Gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?

In verse 16, Peter reminds us that it is a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ. Then he goes on and he challenges us to embrace the persecution, the suffering, the judgment, that God does for those who are His children... the discipline that He brings into our life to develop us. He encourages by saying, "God will discipline you, but God will not damn you. The suffering that you will endure in this world will pass, whereas for those who do not know Jesus, the suffering has just begun for them. We find encouragement in the fact that what God brings us through is to purify us... is to purge us, not to punish us. Punishment and damnation are not a part of our future, as hard as it is to live in this world as a Christian. I think Peter is really kind of anticipating Christians asking the question or coming to believe. How many of you have asked or come to believe... "It's really harder to live as a Christian in this world than a non-Christian." Have you ever felt that way? At every turn, the world hates you and then God is trying to develop you. It's like you can't catch a break. At every turn there is a trial, there's trouble, there's persecution, and you're going, "Really, God? Is this what I need?" And Peter is saying, "Understand the purpose of what God is doing, and He is perfecting you. He is sanctifying you. He is loving you through those trials.

4. Persecution Is To Be Entrusted. (v. 19)

But let's be honest. As Peter goes on, the wisest thing that a Christian can do in the midst of persecution is to entrust God with it... because He wants us to know that God is at work in our lives, and He is doing everything that He can to complete the good work that He started. Our response plays a role in that. The more we embrace persecution than seek to try to escape it, the faster or the more progress we make in our maturation process.

Hebrews 12:11 says this. *"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness..."* Peter really is making this point in verse 17, and then he reinforces it by quoting Proverbs 11:31 from the Septuagint. He is really seeking to encourage us as Christians that God is at work in your life. When trouble and trials and testing find you, realize it's God's thinking of you, that God's is at work to sanctify you, to perfect you, to make you complete and whole... to prepare you to reflect more of His glory and that persecution, that suffering, that judgment will end for all Christians, whereas those who don't know God will suffer eternally. We find strength at its passing, and that it will accomplish God's purposes in our lives. So Peter says that the smartest thing to do is trust God in it. He says this in verse 19. *"Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."* Every pain that God permits to touch your life has a purpose, and that purpose, as we have stated, is to develop you; it's to perfect you. But let's be honest. It's not easy to trust God when your season of life is the one that Gilbert described in his testimony. When you are being crushed and you are pleading to God to send that ray of sunshine and He delivers another storm, it's hard not to get bitter over feeling blessed. You know, it's difficult when you say, "God, please... just encourage me; just pat me on the back..." and you get punched in the gut. It's hard to see God as faithful, isn't it? It's hard to stay the course. It's hard to really believe that there's going to be something positive come out of this pain because everything in you wants to run... wants to escape the fire... wants to find a way out of the suffering. What Peter says is, "That's not the wise thing but the foolish thing to do," because he is reminding us in this... in God's judgment and God's work and God's damnation of those who don't receive the Good News of the Gospel, the free gift of eternal life through Christ's suffering on the cross. He is saying this: "You're in a spiritual battle, and you need to keep in mind that the trials that God brings into your life have been brought into your life to develop your faith."

Well, here's the other side. Those same trials, the evil one wants to use to destroy your faith... to cause you to doubt God... to cause you despair, discouragement, depression... to change your perspective on God and to have you turn your back on Him. That is where we have to exercise faith and trust, and we can't respond to the flesh's longing because it is going to scream and squirm to escape the suffering, and it's faith that is going to stay the course and believe that God is working out something good and that God is sanctifying me. And if I stop now, I am only going to have to go through it again later. That God has a plan that He is perfecting and that He is working in your life, and a part of that plan is our picking up our cross and our carrying it faithfully for the cause of Christ because suffering is a part of the sanctifying process of God's work in our life this side of heaven. The evil one also knows this, that a devoted disciple is a dangerous person to the forces of darkness in the world. (Clapping)

Here is the truth. Darkness cannot stand in the presence of light. You have the power to repel it, and he is going to do all he can to discourage you from carrying the light into the dark places that he has claimed that Jesus wants to own. We carry the light, and so we catch the arrows... the evil one's attacks to try to stop us. The devil is happy for us to embrace the false-news narrative of cultural Christianity which says this: Comfort and convenience are more important than commitment to Christ... that you can be a

Christian and not carry a cross. That's false news... that's a lie. There are some in our culture who have embraced it, and it's dangerous for us. Because the reality is this: If you embrace a cultural Christianity... a Christianity that doesn't include the cross, the fruit of the Spirit, the fellowship of God that you long for will never find its way into your life. Then we'll say, "You know, I've tried it. I've been there and done that and it didn't work," ...when we never fully embraced the true message of the Gospel, the Good News of Christ's suffering for our sake and offering us eternal life by trusting the payment that He made for our sin... and then asking us to reveal in our generation that same sacrificial love by carrying our own crosses and embracing suffering as a gift for the promise that it holds.

In closing, can we have a heart-to-heart? You know, by God's grace, we have not been asked to carry the cross the martyrdom. We have lived in a culture that has all kinds of religious freedoms, and so much grace has been poured out on our lives. As we read this text and we understand the kind of persecution that was on the horizon and Peter was preparing the early Church for, it's really foreign to us. But the truth is this... that same level of persecution may be on our horizon. You don't have to imagine too hard the clouds of persecution forming in our culture, in our day. The question is this: "Are we prepared?" Are we prepared to carry the cross, to represent Christ in the same way and with the same honor that the early-Church Christians did that preserved the faith for us.

Mark Batterson, the pastor of National Community Church, wrote this in his book "All In." He said, "If Jesus hung on His cross for us, the least we can do is carry our cross for Him." In reality, no one ever truly sacrifices anything for God because the eternal reward always outweighs the temporal discomfort. Kneeling at the foot of the cross and surrendering to His lordship is a radical act of dethroning ourselves and enthroning Christ as King. As a follower of Christ, nothing belongs to us... not even ourselves. When did the Church start believing that God wants to send us to safe places to do easy things? ...that faithfulness is holding up the fort... that playing it safe is safe at all. If there is any greater privilege than sacrifice... that radical is anything but normal. Jesus did not die to keep us safe. He died to make us dangerous. Do you want to be a dangerous disciple? Do you want the forces of darkness to tremble when you walk into a room? Then we need to start to pray dangerous prayers. (Clapping) We need to have the courage to say, "Lord, if what is required for Houston to become a little bit more like heaven, it is the loss of everything I have." ...that we say "Lord, take it." That we have such a passion, such a love for God that if what is needed for revival's fire to be lit in our nation is the actual physical loss of our life, we say, "Lord Jesus, point me to my cross" and we willingly lay down our lives for the sake of the Gospel, for the cause of Christ, for the glory of God because God is worthy. My hope is that we become dangerous, and that requires dedication. And for many of us, it requires a doubling down on the faith we have committed to... not to let doubt push the commitment from our lives because, in our culture, that's easy to let happen. Tragically, there are so many Christians walking away from the faith every day because the fruit of the Spirit has not been real in their life. The fellowship of God hasn't been something that they have experienced. The tragedy is that they have chosen to love comfort more than Christ because God has promised to come to each of us who are willing to trust Him and to take Him at His word.

Please pray with me. "Lord Jesus, give us the courage to really embrace the truth that sanctification is found through suffering. Lord, give us the faith to see Your love in the midst of the persecution. Lord, give us the ability to rededicate ourselves each day to walk in faith, to follow You in carrying the cross that You have called us to bear. Lord, I pray that You would pour out Your presence on Houston Northwest, that You would manifest the fruit of Your Spirit and that You would incarnate Yourself in supernatural ways in the lives of those who will pick up their cross and dedicate their lives to be devoted followers of Jesus Christ... dangerous disciples. For Your glory we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen."

Persecution's Promise | 1 Peter 4:12-19 | July 23, 2017
By Guest Speaker Galen Blom. Week 7 in the series "Tested."

God has spoken His Word today through Galen to us. Let's give the Lord a round of applause. "Thank you God for Your Word, for that truth."