

When The Bough Breaks

1 Peter 4:12-13

Rock-a-Bye, Baby” is a song mothers have sung to their babies for many, many years. It has a soothing melody, and when sung by a loving mother to her baby, it surely has a calming effect. But one day several years ago, as I was singing that little tune to one of my own children, I realized with a shock how terrible was the scene played out by the words to that little song. Have you thought about it?

*Rock-a-bye, Baby, on the tree tops,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall
And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

That’s awful! I guess it’s a good thing that the little babies can’t understand those words! If they did, that would set them crying all over again!

I’ve never seen a baby’s cradle in the top of a tree, but I’ve been in situations when I felt as though I was in a tree top, because of some crisis or situation which seemed to grow worse by the minute. I’ve been in situations when it seemed as though the bough, or the tree branch, holding me up, had just broken with a loud snap, and I was falling rapidly, with nothing to support me or stop my fall.

You’ve been there, too, haven’t you? One minute you’re safe and secure. The next minute you are tumbling head over heels in a figurative sense as it seems that your entire world has crumbled. All the props have been knocked out from under you, and you are falling.

Here so far in 1 Peter, we’ve seen that Peter was trying to prepare his readers for a time of severe persecution which would break out upon them because of their faith in Christ. We’ve been probing what that means for our own time, when we are facing a storm of anti-Christian sentiment, legislation, philosophies, attitudes and lifestyles. The day may come for us here in America, as it has for Christians all around the world, when we are forced to give up a lot because of our faith in Christ. That’s what the passage before us is addressing.

But I believe the truth found in this passage goes far beyond that. I believe it applies equally as well to any other type of trouble in which we find ourselves—persecution, disappointment, misunderstanding, unkind rumors, criticism,

financial reverses, loss a job, loss of health, the death of a loved one, and on and on. So regardless of the type of trouble you are experiencing right now, or will face tomorrow, look to these verses from First Peter to learn of the ways you and I can respond when the bough breaks in our own lives, and we find ourselves in trouble. Today we look at just the first response we should make as Christians, but pay attention to this: we cannot know the others until this one has become a part of our lives.

1 Rejoice without surprise, vv. 12-13

The Bible records many different occasions when people were surprised. The Pharisees were surprised once when Jesus did not wash before a meal. Nicodemus was surprised when Jesus told him that he had to be born again before he could enter the kingdom of God. The disciples were surprised when they found Jesus talking to a woman at the well. In every one of those instances, the various individuals were surprised because something was happening which they did not expect.

But the Bible also tells us that we should *not* be surprised at certain things, because those are things we *should* expect. Paul told us that since Satan himself can masquerade as an angel of light, that we should not be surprised if Satan's servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Expect that it will happen! Paul also told the Thessalonian Christians that they needed to be ready for the day when Jesus returns, so they would not be surprised, as they might be should a thief come in the middle of the night. Expect that it will happen!

Even John, the man who became known as the Apostle of Love, had encountered people who didn't love him back, simply because of his faithful witness. So in his first letter, John reminded his readers of Cain and Abel. Remember them? Cain was a very religious man. He worked the soil, and one day brought some of the fruits of his labor to give as an offering to the Lord. So if he was a religious man, why did he kill his brother?

Almost at the other end of the Bible, John wrote, *"Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous"* (1 John 3:12). Cain was religious, yet he was not righteous; there's a big difference. So in the very next verse, John wrote, *"Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you"* (3:13). Expect that it will happen! If your life glorifies God, Satan will launch an offensive against you. The offensive is all the more effective if the enemy can use other Christians—and he does with great regularity.

There are some today who believe and teach that if you are a faithful follower of Christ that your life will never have any problems. Everything will be smooth and peaceful, and everyone will love you. But Peter is telling us that that is just not true. If you live a godly, Christ-honoring life, you are going to encounter difficulty of some kind or another. It will happen on the job, at school, even in your own home, because people who have rejected the Gospel of Christ will resist and oppose that Gospel wherever it appears.

If you live for Christ, by definition your life is going to be different from those who do not live for Christ. You're not only going to be different, but the difference itself will convict those who are outside of Christ. Think about it: in a world where goodness is almost considered to be a handicap, the standards of Christ, as well as those people who live by them, are offensive! No wonder trouble is normal for the Christian!

Peter's original readers were facing tough times as believers, so he told them, *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."* Those are words we need to read again and again until we hear what they say—"Don't be surprised when you have trouble!" Peter was pointing out to them that trouble which arose because of their faith was normal. The words he used for "surprised" and "strange" both come from the same word, and mean "to be a foreigner." He was telling them *not* to be surprised. So Peter was saying, "When trouble comes into your life because of your commitment to Christ, don't look upon that trouble as you would at a stranger. No, you should be well-acquainted with this kind of trouble."

The word "happening" at the end of verse twelve demonstrates this idea, too. It literally means "to stand together" and was originally used to describe two people at odds with each other, who come together to discuss the situation and hopefully resolve it. Gradually, as the word evolved, it came simply to mean "to come together," in the sense of something happening. Peter saw the Christian as being on one road, and persecution as being on another road, and eventually the two roads converge. Peter saw persecution of believers as inevitable. In our day, too, we Christians are on a collision course with trouble. Expect it, and expecting it, don't be surprised!

Peter's words reveal something else about this trouble. He called it "a painful trial," as the NIV puts it. The word for "painful" actually means "to ignite," so when the KJV uses the word "fiery" that's what it's talking about. And while fire

does cause pain, Peter saw the fire of trouble as a refining fire, to remove from our lives and faith anything impure. He had written earlier in his letter (1 Peter 1:6-7) *“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”*

The word he used for “trial” means “to put to the test.” It’s pretty remarkable how trouble tests us, how it acts like a fire to burn off the façade, the hypocrisy, which hides what we’re really like. The fire of trouble burns all that phoniness away, and what’s left is how we really are. Have you ever seen how carefully a pharmacist counts the medication for your prescription? No pharmacist ever dispensed medication as carefully as God dispenses trial and difficulty to His people. He knows exactly how much we need in order to make us strong, and He never, ever hands out one gram too much.

You can tell what a person is really like deep inside by the way that person reacts to trouble or to anything unpleasant which occurs. If that person reacts angrily, accusingly or with bitterness, then it’s only because that’s what’s been in the character of that person all along.

One beautiful Saturday afternoon a few years ago, I was getting everything ready to put some hamburgers and chicken on the grill. When I rolled the grill over, I discovered that the tank was empty, which seemed strange, since I didn’t think I had used that much since I had last refilled it. My first thought was that there was a leak somewhere, so I connected the extra tank I had. When all the connections were tight, I turned the valve on top of the grill—and heard a sound which told me where the problem was. The brass connection which held the hose from the tank into the bottom of the grill had a hairline crack in it. It was there all along, but I could not find it until the pressurized gas flowed through it.

Sometimes our loving, wise Heavenly Father knows exactly what we need to go through in order to show us where the “cracks” are! When trouble comes to our lives or to the life of a church, many times we react with what has been called “ejection-seat Christianity”: we want to bail out! But if a person acts with grace, calm, patience and love, then it is because he or she has already surrendered the trials of life over to the Heavenly Father, so that trouble or unpleasant circumstances do not catch that person off-guard.

But Peter is careful to tell them what to do instead, and if we pay attention to what he said, we can avoid being surprised when the bough breaks. That's something you'll need to notice as you read the Scriptures, that many times when we are told not to do something, the next verse or two tells us what we are to do instead. Peter told us that we are not to be surprised when trouble comes, *"but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."*

Rejoice? Is he serious? He's so serious in fact that he tells us several times, in various ways, that rejoicing should be a part of our response to trouble. In fact, Peter says, literally, "Be constantly rejoicing." Let it be a part of who you are as a child of God, and if it's part of who you are, then no trial or unpleasant circumstances can take that joy away from you. But listen carefully: to rejoice in times of trouble is much more than a grin-and-bear-it attitude. It's much more than a time of tough-it-out-and-see-how-much-you-can-take. And it's so much more than a time of just-hang-in-there-and-don't-let-anything-get-you-down.

One of the biggest reasons why we don't always understand the reason and purpose of God in allowing us to go through trial is because we are looking backward: "What did I do back there in my past to deserve this kind of trouble?" But God is always looking forward: "What great blessing can this child of Mine know in the future because of the present difficulty?" And that is what Peter was saying here: the present is represented in the words, *"so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."*

To a person who doesn't know Christ, it makes no sense at all that overflowing joy should come from a difficult experience. But Peter used a word which helps us understand a little better: "Participate" (or "partakers" in the KJV) is closely related to the word for "fellowship." When we go through a difficult period in our lives because of our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, we are walking down the same path He walked. We are experiencing the same thing He experienced. We are fellowshiping with Christ.

That was a desire Paul had. He wrote the Philippian Christians: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"* (Philippians 3:10). It is an experience each of us can have, should we ever find ourselves toeing the line because of our faith in Him.

Have you learned to view your trouble and difficulty as a fellowship with Christ in His suffering? The Bible says that is to be our understanding of the things God allows in our lives. Have you learned to rejoice in the face of trouble without surprise? The Bible also says that rejoicing is to be our response to trouble, simply because we know we are experiencing only what our Heavenly Father is allowing, and that He is allowing the pain and trouble for our good.

When the bough breaks in your life, you don't have to fall, if you have surrendered your life to Him well in advance. Do you need to do that today?