

Tested Genuineness of Your Faith

Would it surprise you at all to learn that there’s not a single day that goes by when I, as a pastor, do not spend time face-to-face or on the phone with individuals who are experiencing trials, suffering, persecution or pain?

This past week, I kept a written log of the conversations I engaged in that involved someone asking for encouragement, support, prayer, Christian counsel or a sympathetic shoulder to lean on. You’d be stunned to know the wide array of painful things average people are dealing with, some more successfully than others. Some of the painful things people shared with me this past week are short-lived, while others have no end in sight.

In that light, is it not true that the older we get and the more of life we experience, the more Job’s words ring true in our hearts? Words such as: “Man is born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upward; for the arrows of the Almighty are in me; I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me; my eye will never again see good; my face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness; my spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me.”

I’ve been around enough people just this week alone to have heard firsthand such expressions of pain: “My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, and the graveyard is ready for me.” Further, I know you well enough to understand that, for some sitting here this morning, those I have not spoken to over the past seven days, Job’s words accurately reflect the cries of your heart as well. Friends, there is a reality of life that we must all come to grips with, and it’s this: Perhaps not today or tomorrow, but some day; trials, pain, suffering, loss and deep heartache come to all of us. None are exempt.

Now it’s with that sobering reality in mind that we continue this morning in our study of I Peter. As I’ve said each of the previous three weeks in this study, suffering is the reason why Peter wrote to the elect exiles of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. And whereas in the first five verses of the book Peter discussed several significant theological truths, here in verses six and seven he directed his attention toward the thing that was most important to them, that being the suffering they were experiencing as followers of Jesus Christ.

Peter wrote: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Now the first thing for us to do as we take apart these two verses is to make certain we are clear about what Peter meant when he began verse six with the phrase, “In this you rejoice.” In other words, what is the “this” he had in mind when he made reference to it in serving as the source of their rejoicing? Well, as we can see from the text, that’s not a hard

question to answer. What he had in mind are the truths he’s already presented to them in the preceding verses.

Remember now, the whole purpose of this letter is to encourage suffering Christians. That’s the specific direction he’s headed now in verses six and seven. And the means whereby he sought to encourage them was to point them to the inheritance that awaits them as followers of Jesus Christ. Glance to verses four and five. He told them that they had an inheritance to look forward to, something that was imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept safely in heaven for them. And further, the one who guarantees this inheritance is the benefactor himself, God. He wrote, “...who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

So everything he’s said to them thus far was for the purpose of framing their present suffering in the context of heaven, their imperishable inheritance, guarded for them by God himself. What he wants them to know is that the salvation given to them in Christ serves as the foundation of their security and joy. They have both a living hope for this life and an everlasting inheritance in the life to come. But, just as surely as their inheritance is guaranteed, so is suffering. Thus, as he continued in verses six and seven, he directed his attention to the specific topic of suffering.

Now at the outset, it’s important for us to acknowledge that joy flowing from our relationship with the Lord is a consistent command throughout the Bible. Psalm 37 tells us to delight ourselves in the Lord. Psalm 102 commands us to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Deuteronomy 12 instructs us to rejoice before the Lord in everything we do. Jesus himself commanded us to rejoice and leap for joy. Further, he said that the things he taught were for the purpose of his joy becoming our joy.

The Apostle Paul commanded us to rejoice in the Lord always. He tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is joy, and that a major motivation for his ministry is for the advancement of the joy and faith of all Christians. On and on the scriptures make joy a significant, necessary and expected outcome for those who know Jesus Christ as their Savior. Joy is to be a distinguishing mark of those who truly know Christ. Without such joy, the genuineness of one’s relationship with the Lord comes into question.

Yet, it’s a common experience for all of us that one of the most powerful barriers to the joy Peter had in mind is the trials and suffering we endure; the things that so frequently and effectively drain us dry of joy. Now, here’s where this can get muddled, and here’s what I mean by that.

The scriptures also present us with two reasons why Christians should be joyful. One you already know. It’s all of what Peter described in verses one through five of chapter one. God has caused us to be born again to a living hope. God is keeping our inheritance for us; and

further, God is keeping us safe for the inheritance. So, one basis for our joy is that God is keeping the inheritance, as well as keeping us in faith, so that we will not make a wreck of our faith and lose the inheritance. We've discussed that already. That's precisely what Peter had in mind when he said, "In this you rejoice."

But -- and here is now where this gets very practical for us -- an additional reason for joy is that God has a purpose and design for the suffering and trials that enter our lives. Let me say that again. *Joy comes in knowing that God has a purpose and design for the trials that enter our lives.* So rather than stealing our joy, Peter's point is that suffering is sovereignly assigned to us by God for the express purpose of *enhancing* our joy. That is to say that God's purpose in suffering is to make our faith more genuine, from which flows deepening joy.

See if you can find that principle in any current self-help or psychology book. Yet that's exactly what verses six and seven are all about. And can you see the linkage between suffering and joy? In verses three through five, Peter's point is that our inheritance is there, kept safe by God so that no matter what suffering we face, we can look beyond it to the sure future that's coming.

But in verses six and seven, Peter approached it from a different perspective, namely that the suffering we experience has a vital part in preparing us to enjoy the inheritance that awaits us. That represents an entirely different perspective on how to view suffering and trials, does it not? God has a design for our trials, that being, at least in part, to prepare us for even greater joy when our eternal inheritance is fully realized at the salvation that's ready to be revealed in the last time. Simply put, Peter wanted them to view their present circumstances as a means of enhancing their joy in their coming inheritance.

Although it's not a perfect analogy, what comes to mind for me in that light is the world class athlete who suffers mightily in the practice room for years in anticipation of the ultimate competition that will bring him or her the championship crown they so long for. That's not to suggest that the anticipation of a future reward makes the suffering of the practice room any less severe or real. But the reality is that you don't win the crown in athletics apart from suffering. They go hand in hand. Is it not the case that the reward is enjoyed to an even greater degree when framed in light of the suffering that made it possible?

You see, Peter is not trying to minimize their suffering by any means. He acknowledged the reality of their circumstances. Yet he wanted them to know that their circumstances were assigned to them by God for the purpose of enhancing their joy. And what he does not want them to do is to confuse the testing of their faith with the failure of their faith, or to think that their present distress implies they have inadequate faith.

There are those out there today who would say just that. They would have us believe that suffering, or at least the removal of it from our lives, is predicated on our ability to muster

enough faith to prevent or eliminate it. Of course faith is the key to answered prayer. But God never promises to remove us from suffering based on the magnitude of our faith; and that's because he has a greater purpose in mind for our suffering. Thus, his purpose is not to remove us from suffering; but by his grace and our faith, to use it to increase our joy in anticipation of our future inheritance. Can you see from that, that God has a definite purpose and design in our suffering?

Let me show you some other things Peter said to demonstrate his point in this regard. Peter made it plain later in the book that the suffering that enters our lives only comes as part of God's will for us. Later in chapter three, verse seventeen, Peter wrote, "For it is better to suffer for doing good if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." His point is that you might suffer for doing good, or you might not. God determines that.

Later in chapter four, Peter wrote, "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good." What Peter is saying is that the sovereign will of God governs all the suffering that enters our lives. Thus, God's design is not simply to cause us pain, but rather to accomplish his purpose in us through suffering. Which naturally leads to the question: What is the purpose of God sovereignly allowing suffering to enter our lives?

Well, take a look at the initial two words in verse seven, "so that." This gives us the reason why God would deem it necessary that we be distressed with various trials. Verse seven shows us God's purpose in our suffering. It's so that the genuineness of our faith would win praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The analogy Peter used is a familiar one in the Bible. He made reference to the tested genuineness of their faith as "more precious than gold though tested by fire." Job linked suffering with silver and gold when he said, "Surely there is a mine for silver and a place that they refine gold." That place for Job to find silver and gold was in suffering. Our trials are designed to refine our faith, thereby increasing our joy, so that when Christ returns, the quality of our faith would win praise and glory and honor unto God, who gave us the faith in the first place and guards it for a salvation ready to be revealed.

Now with all of that in mind, there are several specific things I want us to note in verses six and seven. First note the phrase "various trials." What that suggests is that suffering in the life of the Christian takes on a variety of forms. I saw that first hand this past week. Here's what I've been exposed to in the past seven days alone. I learned of a Christian family that endured the funeral of their infant daughter, while later that same day received news that the baby's grandfather died. I spoke with a wife who learned of her diagnosis of cancer. She expressed her desire for prayer as she was about to share that with her husband.

Ruth and I had dinner with dear friends who are seeking God’s direction in overcoming roadblocks to entering into full-time missionary service. I cried with a set of parents who have come to the decision that their adult developmentally disabled son can no longer live in their home and must now live independently for the first time in his life. I’ve communicated almost daily this past week with Pastor Jeff Hinds at Highland Church. The young man that was injured and later died in an industrial accident in Schofield served as a pastoral intern under Pastor Jeff. He was a vibrant Christian and left behind a wife and two children.

And on top of all of that, I came to the office on Thursday to discover what some call the blue screen of death on my computer, threatening the loss of everything on my hard drive; seven plus years of preaching notes and manuscripts; also to discover that the external hard drive designed to protect all my files had not been functioning as it should.

I could go on and on if I chose. Look again at Peter’s words: “...grieved by various trials.” I’d certainly say so, wouldn’t you? Add to that list the things you’ve been exposed to over the past seven days, and the phrase “various trials” takes on a whole range of meaning, does it not?

The point is that the various ways that we experience distress is great. God knows us best, and in God’s design it’s necessary to use a wide variety of trials in order to increase our joy. One author put it this way: “God paints with many colors; many dark and many bright. Yet in the end, the canvass of our lives will be bright and glorious if we entrust our souls to a faithful creator.”

Now I want us to note as well another phrase Peter used to define trials. He said, “Though now for a little while...” In other words, from God’s perspective, our trials are brief in duration. They may not seem so to us; but according to God’s master plan for increasing our joy, they are brief indeed. Now to be sure, the phrase “a little while” can mean many different things. You see, compared to others, our trials may last a long time. But compared to eternity, compared to the imperishable inheritance Peter is framing trials against, can you see how the phrase “a little while” applies?

The Apostle James put it this way: “What is your life? ...For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” Compared to the length and greatness of the future God has guaranteed for Christians, all the distress of this life is very short in duration. That’s why Peter could say in chapter five and verse ten, “And after you have suffered for a little while (the same phrase), the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

Now take a look as well at another word Peter used to describe trials. He applied the word “grieved” to the trials we may experience. The word itself means to be made sorrowful, sad or distressed. What that means is that, in God’s way of working, there are instances when

the trials we encounter constitute deep, authentic, sorrowful, painful, heartbreaking and soul stretching things. There is a place in God’s design for deep and authentic pain and grieving. Peter is not trying to convince them otherwise. Such pain is real; it’s deep; it can lay our hearts bare, causing us to despair of life. Read what David and Jeremiah said of such experiences in their lives.

But -- and here is the focus of Peter’s words -- as Christians, our response to such things is different from the way the world experiences it. As Christians, we know that there’s a purpose, a design in all of it. Thus, our foundation remains steadfast and unshaken, even though the winds of grievous trials blow around us.

All of this now leads us to consider the practical things we might do when grievous trials overwhelm us. I am hesitant to even state it in that manner because it sounds like a step-by-step program for dealing with pain, a self-help program of sorts. But isn’t it stunning to consider that the God who seeks to purify our faith and thereby increase our joy in the midst of trials also provides us with directions as to how we might respond during trials?

I want to leave you now with three things to consider when you are sensing your faith being refined like gold in the furnace of suffering. Take these down, would you? First, *fight for faith*. The trials themselves, the enemy aligned against us, and even the counsel and wisdom of friends and the world can bring doubt into our hearts. Recall that the purpose of trials is to increase our joy through the refining of our faith. Fight to hang on to the blessed truth that God’s love for us never promises us freedom from trials.

Rather, he promises to increase our joy in anticipation of the imperishable inheritance that awaits us, precisely *because* of our trials. Fight, in quiet solitude to lay hold of the deep and mysterious truths that flow from the heart of the things God allows to enter our lives. Fight to hold on to the blessed truth, that the day will come when we will know that the most exquisite work of our lives was done during the darkest of our days.

Fight in faith, embracing the reality that great character is made, not through an easy life, but through suffering. Suffering is a wonderful fertilizer for the roots of character. Remember; the very time for faith to work is when our sight begins to fail. Fight for faith.

Second, *persist in prayer*. Never allow your trials to distract you from the discipline of prayer. Prayer and worship are never sweeter than during the dark of night, in the depth of sorrow and pain. Prayer in the midst of pain tells God that we are unable, while he is able; that we are powerless, while he is all powerful; that we are empty, while he is full; that we are lost, while he knows the path; that we are weak, while he is strong; that we are utterly without resources, while he is the God of all resources.

As it relates to this second point, I would tell you without hesitation that, while in the deepest of sorrows, the very best expenditure of time and tears is to pray. Pray for endurance.

Pray for release, all the while telling God that you are grieved and sorrowful at what you are experiencing. Never allow your grievous trials to distract you from your communication with God. Pray, dear friend; pray.

First, fight for faith. Second, persist in prayer. And finally, wait with patience. God knows how to lead us to the point of crisis. He knows how to sustain us in the midst of crisis, and he most assuredly knows how to carry us out of crisis. Yet, we must recall that all of that is in his timing.

I've come to see in my own life that God often steps forward to release us from suffering when we least expect it. The length of our suffering is not the issue from God's perspective. Rather, the outcome, faith that is more precious than gold, is the issue for God. If today as you sit here you are indeed grieved by various trials, I implore you to keep the words of Peter in mind. God will use your trials to deepen your joy in anticipation of the inheritance that awaits you. Our posture is to be one of faith, prayer and patience in his plans and purposes.

Do you know what the ultimate reward will be? I came across a passage in Job this week, one I'd not noticed before. Upon reading, it caused me to get out of my chair and on my knees as it relates to the outcome of having our faith purified and our joy increased through trials. In Job 22:25, in the deepest part of his suffering, one of Job's friends said this to him. "The Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver. For then you will delight yourself in the Almighty and lift your face to God."

Do you hear it? Our ultimate reward is not freedom from pain and suffering. Our ultimate reward is *God*. He rewards us with himself and along the way increases our joy by purifying our faith through trials, pain and suffering. What a precious thing to embrace.

Perhaps you've never heard of Annie Flint. She was an orphan who, along with her sister, was raised by foster parents who brought her up to trust God's faithfulness. As a young school teacher in the early 1900s, she was stricken with crippling arthritis. There was no treatment available to her in that day. Within three years, it was impossible for her to walk, so she had to give up teaching. Her foster parents were deceased and her sister was too frail to care for Annie, so she moved into a sanitarium.

In order to pay for her stay there, with no hope of recovery or relief, she began to write and sell poetry. A pencil was pushed into her virtually useless hands and she, with great physical agony, penned poems of her experiences of God's faithfulness. With no prospect of her life ever becoming better, with no hope of relief from the physical pain that racked her body, with no likelihood of release from the crushing loneliness that consumed her, with virtually no one in this world to whom she might turn for human comfort, she wrote the following.

“He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth his mercies;
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.
When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father’s full giving is only begun.
His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.”

(“He Giveth More Grace” by Annie J. Flint, 1862-1932. Arrangement copyright 1941. Renewed 1969 by Lillenas Publishing Co.
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