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JOY FROM THE PITS

1 Peter 1:6-9

by

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1 Peter Lesson 3

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1 Peter 1:6-9

I find that there's a lot of confusion among Christians about how we're supposed to deal with suffering. Some say that if we suffer it's because we lack faith. We're supposed to claim healing by faith and deny all negative thoughts. This is clearly unbiblical, yet it persists.

Others say that Christians must go through suffering, but they're supposed to do it with a smile on their face. They quote verses to suffering saints like, "Rejoice always.... In everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:16, 18); "All things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). A few years ago I did a funeral for a man in his thirties who left a wife and two children. In the lobby after the service, the widow's former pastor came bouncing up to her and said, "Praise the Lord, he's in glory now!" I felt like punching him! That approach to suffering leads to hypocrisy and emotional problems, in my opinion. People put on the phony smile and mouth cliches, like "Praise the Lord," but inside they're hurting and not praising the Lord. They're denying the grief and pain that are really there. It's neither a biblical nor an emotionally healthy approach to suffering.

In reacting against that approach, some say that we need to express how we feel. We're supposed to work through all the stages of grief. We're told to vent all our anger, rage, and bitterness. If we don't feel it, we're in denial. People are even encouraged to rail at God, with the assurance that "He can take it. Tell Him how ticked off at Him you really are." We're told that if we don't do this, we'll create emotional problems for ourselves.

I would argue that none of these are biblical or emotionally healthy ways to deal with suffering. The biblical way is not to deny the pain or grief, but at the same time to have genuine joy in the Lord from the pits.

Hebrews 12:11 states plainly, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteous-

ness." Paul spoke of his own experience through trials as being "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). He modeled it many times, but perhaps no where as clearly as when he and Silas sang praises to God at midnight from the Philippian jail, as their backs were laid open from the illegal scourging they had received (Acts 16:25).

Peter, in writing to suffering Christians, tells them that they greatly rejoice at the same time that they are distressed by various trials (1 Pet. 1:6). He is not denying the distress--the word means grief or pain. But neither is he discarding the genuine joy that a Christian can experience in the midst of the pain if he has the right perspective. Peter himself had felt it. After being flogged and warned to speak no further in the name of Jesus, he and the other apostles "went on their way ... rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). That's joy from the pits! In our text, Peter tells us how to have it:

Because the Savior uses trials to refine our faith we can have joy from the pits by looking to Him and His salvation.

1 Peter 1:3-5 points us to our future inheritance in heaven; 1:6-9 directs us to our present joy amidst trials. From 1:6-9, I want to make three main points:

1. The Savior takes all whom He loves through trials.

May I share some precious promises from Scripture you need to be familiar with:

Of Jesus it is written, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8).

Of us it says, "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.... If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Heb. 12:6, 8).

"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

"In the world you have tribulation" (John 16:33).

"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Therefore, as Peter later says in our epistle, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).

On one occasion while Jesus was still on this earth, Peter had said to Him, “Lord, we have left everything and followed You. What then will there be for us?” (Matt. 19:27). Jesus replied that anyone who left everything and followed Him would receive back in this life a hundred times as much as he gives up--houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, farms. Marvelous! Such a deal! Who wouldn't sign up for such a program? But, then in the same breath, Jesus added, “... along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:30).

In this life: trials, persecutions, hardships for Jesus' sake--it's part of the deal. Yes, there are untold blessings now, as Jesus makes clear. Yes, it's a truly abundant life (John 10:10). But, yes again, the abundance is often the deep, abiding joy of salvation we feel from the pits. Trials are the mark of Jesus' special love. No one loved by Him is exempt.

But, why? That's what we always ask, isn't it? Why does God take us through trials?

2. The Savior takes all whom He loves through trials to refine their faith.

Peter shows us the purpose of trials, the perspective needed in trials and the final product of trials.

A. The purpose of trials is to refine faith.

“That” (1:7) points to the purpose of the various trials of 1:6: that our faith might be tested or refined, like gold, to remove the dross so that at the coming of Christ there will be praise, honor, and glory. Faith is at the very heart of the Christian life. We are saved by faith; we walk by faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

Peter both contrasts and compares faith with gold. He contrasts it in that faith is more precious than gold because gold is perishable, but faith isn't. Gold won't gain heaven, but faith will.

All the gold in the world is worthless the instant you die and stand before God. Only faith in Jesus Christ will do in that day.

Peter compares faith with gold in that both are refined by fire. The words "proof" and "tested" have the nuance of testing with a view to approval. God does not test our faith to make it fail, but to burn off the dross and leave the pure gold. He does this by putting us in the furnace of affliction where we are forced to trust Him in ways we never would apart from such trials.

We need to be clear that there is such a thing as false faith that does fail. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that in the shallow, rocky soil, the seed sprouted, but when the sun came out, it withered and died because it had no root. He explained that this refers to those who first receive the word with joy, but when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, they fall away, thus showing that their faith was not genuine (Mark 4:5-6, 16-17).

But genuine faith will grow stronger, not weaker, through trials. As the great hymn, "How Firm a Foundation" puts it, "The flame will not hurt thee, I only design, thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." Last year I was under attack from a number of people because of some things I was preaching. I read a comment by Martin Luther (*Commentary on Peter and Jude* [Kregel], pp. 39-40) where he said that if he had not been attacked as strongly as he had been, he would never have come to the place of certainty or to the full development on the doctrines of faith as he did. In a small way, I could identify with him, in that the Lord used the attacks against me to strengthen my understanding of the basic truths of the gospel which are under attack in our day.

George Muller, a great man of faith, housed, clothed, and fed over 2,000 orphans at a time simply by faith and prayer. He refused to tell potential donors of the needs of the work, even when directly asked, but instead would take the needs to God in prayer. He went through times of severe trial. For one seven-year period, he seldom had funds for more than three days' needs for the orphans, and often the need was met on the very day, sometimes at the exact moment the children sat down to eat. Muller wrote,

The Lord gives faith, for the very purpose of trying it for the glory of His own name, and for the good of him who has it; and, by the very trial of our faith, we not only obtain blessing

to our own souls, by becoming the better acquainted with God, if we hold fast our confidence in Him, but our faith is also, by the exercise, strengthened: and so it comes, that, if we walk with God in any measure of uprightness of heart, the trials of faith will be greater and greater (A. T. Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell], p. 439).

Thus the purpose of trials is to refine our faith.

B. The perspective in trials is to see that they are temporary, necessary, and under God's control.

We like to hike. Last summer we climbed Cloud's Rest in Yosemite, which gives one of the most panoramic views of Yosemite National Park. You can see the whole lay of the land. You gain perspective that you simply can't get while you're hiking the trails below.

In the same way, it helps to gain God's perspective on trials. Peter does that by reminding us that they are *temporary*: "for a little while." Maybe you're thinking, "A little while? Good grief, I've been going through this trial for years!" That's a little while compared to eternity. Paul expressed the same thing when he said, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

Trials are temporary; salvation is eternal. In a short while, Jesus Christ is returning in glory and we will spend all eternity with Him. Our present trials, no matter how great, will pale in significance in the light of eternity. Thus, in the midst of our pain, we can have great joy if we will focus on the shortness of time and the eternal glory that awaits us when Jesus returns.

Peter also adds perspective by saying that trials are *necessary* ("if necessary"). They are necessary, as we just saw, to refine our faith. But also, I think Spurgeon is right when he says that not only the trials, but also the distress, is necessary. He argues ("The Christian's Heaviness and Rejoicing," *Spurgeon's Sermons* [Baker], 5:210-221) that it is needful that sometimes a Christian's spirit even be cast down. Christ experienced distress even unto death in the gar-

den. If a Christian doesn't go through those times when he is depressed, Spurgeon argues, he will grow proud, he won't be able to relate to others who suffer, and he will miss lessons that we learn no other way. He cites Luther as saying that "affliction is the best book in my library."

Malcolm Muggeridge, who became a Christian before his death, said late in his life, "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, everything I have learned, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness" (*Reader's Digest* [1/91], p. 158).

The third perspective Peter offers is that trials are *under God's control*. This is the overall implication here--that God is using trials as a goldsmith, watching the molten metal, skimming off the dross until He can see His face reflected in it. To know that God is sovereign is a great comfort when you're going through trials. He hasn't forgotten you. He wasn't asleep or on vacation when your problem hit. He is working all things, including our trials, for good according to His sovereign plan (Eph. 1:11; Rev. 6:9-11).

Thus the purpose of trials is to refine our faith; the perspective we need in our trials is that they are temporary, necessary, and under God's control.

C. The product of trials is reward when Christ returns.

The result will be "praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Whose praise, glory, and honor is Peter talking about? Since God alone is worthy of praise, glory, and honor in the ultimate sense, we could argue that His praise alone is in view. But there is a secondary sense in which God will reward believers at the coming of Christ with praise (1 Cor. 4:5; Matt. 25:21, 23), glory (Rom. 2:7, 10; Col. 3:4), and honor (Rom. 2:7, 10; 2 Tim. 4:8). We share these because of our identification with Christ (Rom. 8:17), and we will properly cast all honors back at His feet. Yet we can endure trials knowing that we will be rewarded when Christ returns.

Thus the Savior takes all whom He loves through trials; He does it to refine our faith.

3. We can have joy from the pits by looking to the Savior and His salvation.

“In this you greatly rejoice” (1:6). In what? In our great salvation just described in 1:3-5. Even though we are in the pits, temporarily distressed by our trials, we can look to our Savior and the salvation He has provided, which we already have begun to enjoy, but which we won’t experience in full until He returns, and we will have an inexpressible, glorious joy that floods our souls right there in the pits. How do we gain this joy from the pits? Three ways:

- A. We look to the Savior with faith.

We’ve already seen that trials are to purify our faith. Peter says (1:8) that inexpressible joy in trials comes through believing in Jesus even though we do not see Him. We need to understand that faith is not an automatic response. Neither is it passive endurance. Faith is actively choosing to trust God in spite of my circumstances. Faith is putting my weight down on the firm promises of God. Spurgeon said that trials aren’t just to burn out the dross, but also to burn in the promises.

In a time of trials, it seems as if Christ is not there with you. So by faith you must say, “He promised to be with me even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20), He promised never to leave or forsake me (Heb. 13:5), so I lay hold of Him right now by faith.” As Jesus told Thomas, who didn’t believe in His resurrection until he saw Jesus with his own eyes, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29). That’s us! We will be blessed when we look to the Savior by faith even when we’re in the pits. It’s our choice and duty.

- B. We look to the Savior with hope.

Note the future look of these verses. I’ve already mentioned the temporary nature of our trials in light of eternity. Peter mentions the revelation of Jesus Christ. That means His coming, but it brings out a subtle nuance that is important to grasp, namely, that Jesus is present but unseen right now, but the day is coming when He will be revealed. (Peter repeats this word, in noun or verb form, in 1:5, 7, 13; 4:13; 5:1.)

Also, Peter emphasizes the future sense of our salvation (1:9). In the New Testament, there are three tenses of our salvation. Once we have truly believed in Christ, we can say, "I have been saved from sin's penalty" (John 3:36; Titus 3:5-8). But also, all who have been saved must say, "I am being saved from sin's power" (1 Cor. 1:18; 15:2). Some day we will be saved from sin's presence (Rom. 5:9-10; 13:11; 1 Pet. 1:9). Thus in a time of trial, we look with hope to the Savior who has saved us, is saving us, and will save us completely when He returns.

C. We look to the Savior with love.

"Though you have not seen Him, you love Him" (1:8). Love for Jesus Christ in response to His ultimate love for us as seen in the cross, is the central motivation for the Christian life. It's so easy to drift into the place of the church in Ephesus, which Jesus commended by saying, "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who called themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary." Wow! What more could you want, Lord? "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev. 2:2-4).

It's easy to drift there in your marriage, isn't it? You're faithful to one another. You live together in relative harmony. You function as husband and wife, you raise your children, you pay the bills and do the other things required to run a household. But somewhere the romance went cold. You need to rekindle the delight in your spouse you once knew.

It's the same with the Lord. We can be dutifully living the Christian life, but we've lost the romance with Christ. I'm talking here not just about commitment, which is the core of love, but also feelings which stem from that commitment. I agree with Jonathan Edwards, that the core of religion is emotional. Our hearts need to be filled with love for Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

How do we cultivate and maintain that kind of love for our unseen Savior? Three thoughts:

First, *Spend time alone with Him*. You can't cultivate love for your mate if you never spend time alone together. If you want to love the Lord more, spend time alone with Him in His Word and in prayer.

Second, *Obey Him*. In our day of "sloppy grace," people think that obedience is legalism and has no place under grace. Those who think so need to read their Bibles. Jesus said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love" (John 15:10). The apostle John wrote, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (1 John 5:3). If you are disobeying God, you will not be able to love Him as you should.

Third, *Come frequently to the Lord's table*. It is a time to look to the Savior and the salvation He provided for us at the price of His blood. He knew that we tend to forget, so He instructed us to do it often in remembrance of Him. It's a time to receive His love and express your love back to Him. As you look to Christ and His salvation, as seen in those elements, you will experience His joy, even from the pits.

Discussion Questions

1. Someone in a terrible trial says, "How can a loving God allow this to happen?" How would you respond?
2. Should we express anger toward God? Defend biblically.
3. Is it sin to be depressed? Defend biblically.

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