

“JOY IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: I Peter 1:6-9

Introduction.

Have you talked with your family about how to handle emergency situations in your home such as a fire or an intruder? Have you talked about being careful not to share personal information with strangers on the computer? Are you alert to scammers on the computer or phone?

Have you talked to your teenage driver about what to do in an accident? Fathers, have you taught your sons about gun safety? Husbands, do you talk to your wives about being aware of their surroundings in parking lots?

At your school do they have drills for fire, earthquake, intruders?

It's naïve to assume everything in life will be just fine and safe all the time. Life needs warning labels. It is wise on our part when we know this and pay attention to them.

One of the warning labels Jesus attaches to life is: “In the world you will have tribulation.” “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace” (John 16:33). Peter says the same thing that we might have joy.

The Bible talks a lot about joy and rejoicing, but it is honest to admit not all of life is joyful. Life is a mix of grief and joy, and sometimes joy in the midst of the grief. This is normal life and normal Christian life.

Peter teaches us *six truths* about suffering that if taken to heart will enable us to endeavor to persevere with joy.

Trials are necessary.

Peter begins by saying something strange to our ears. Trials are necessary. Really? Necessary to whom? The implication is necessary to God. In other words, God has designed this world in such a way that trials are necessary, needed.

We don't know what is in store for us in heaven, but we do know that there is a connection between what we go through here on earth and what we will receive in heaven. Trials are God's tools and God's textbooks.

This is meant to encourage us and help us to know our troubles are not random, or chance or bad luck. Just because they make no sense to us doesn't mean they are senseless.

Take this to heart. We will only experience in this life trials that are necessary for our good in the infinite wisdom of God. God knows what we need, what is best for us.

We don't always know the particular need being met or the particular circumstance which necessitates a particular trial but God does and He only and always does all things well.

Psalm 119:75 I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

To understand trials as a necessity changes our attitude in the midst of it.

It's like the difference between putting a *bit and bridle on a horse* that is broken and one that is unbroken. The unbroken horse fights, it rears and kicks, it resists it and refuses to submit to it. The broken horse receives it and accepts it.

The Christian doesn't kick against what he knows to be necessary for his faith, but receives it from God and submits and learns from it.

We will see more clearly why trials are necessary when we get to the refining. For the sake of your joy, settle in your mind that any suffering is deemed necessary by God.

Trials are varied.

Not everyone suffers the same griefs or in the same way or to the same depth. Our trials come in many sizes and shapes and colors. God doesn't just play with one note or even one chord, but uses the whole keyboard. When God paints on the canvas of our lives He uses the whole palette, using dark and light hues.

For the Christians of Peter's time persecution was definitely a large part of their suffering and it is still a large part of the suffering of the majority of the Christian church in the world today.

There is suffering that comes to us from others because we are Christians (persecution).

There is suffering that comes to us because we are human (sickness, disease, weakness).

There is suffering that comes to us from ourselves (sinful desires and choices).

There is suffering that comes to us from Satan (temptations, spiritual attack).

There is suffering that comes to us from God (trials).

They are *varied in kind and in duration*, some trials are short and some very long, some even for a lifetime. I sympathize with people who have chronic pain, the kind that is always there. In earth years they can seem very long, but in eternal years they are very short.

Paul calls them momentary.

II Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

I Peter 5:10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

Settle in your mind that the joy of eternity far outweighs any pain of this temporal life.

Trials are hard.

Peter is not naïve or callused, he doesn't diminish or make light of the hardship and heartache of our trials. Pain and grief and sadness are real. When I encounter people in intense stress or trouble I affirm their sadness. It is OK. Jesus was very distressed and sad in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:38 he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death."

Trials can be hard in their severity or in their duration or in their frequency. This often brings a heaviness to our souls and weariness to our minds and bodies.

Sadness and grief not necessarily a sign of lack of faith or lack of trust. Sadness is a real human emotion in response to very trying circumstances. Tears aren't a sign of weakness, they are a sign of humanness. A brave front or stiff upper lip isn't necessarily a sign of greater spirituality. We really do grieve, just not as those who have no hope.

II Corinthians 6:10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.

Trials are refining.

Peter makes an argument from the lesser thing to the greater thing. If we treat gold with fire to make it more valuable, then how much more will God do this to our faith which is way more valuable than gold.

Our faith has impurities in it, mixtures of unbelief, murmuring, complaining, trusting in things, in money, in appearances, in status, in what people think of us.

God uses times of testing to refine and purify our faith, to wean us from trusting in ourselves or our things or our health or our money. He brings trials so we will depend on Him more and trust Him more.

Paul describes his own journey through one of God's refining fires.

I Corinthians 1:8-10 ... For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

There's the gold, "... to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

Paul was an apostle, writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, yet God saw impurities that needed to be refined. God saw Paul's faith as valuable enough to need more refining.

Why is faith so valuable to God? Because God delights in being trusted. He made us to trust Him and He continually brings us back to that.

Testing exposes who has a false faith and who has a genuine faith. Remember the seed that fell on shallow ground and sprung up quickly but then died at the first hint of tribulation. Remember the foolish man's faith built on the sand that collapsed at the first strong wind of trouble.

Settle this in your mind for the sake of your joy. A faith that has not been tested is a faith that cannot be trusted. Proven faith is real faith that leads to real joy.

Trials are purposeful.

"... so that your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

After God has made our faith more valuable and praise worthy, He will then honor and praise it at the coming of Christ.

God does all this so that we can share in His praise and honor and glory in Christ in heaven. We were created for glory, we are kept for glory and we are being prepared for a glory to come.

Endeavor to persevere for the day of Christ is coming and then all things will be known and proven and rewarded and all things will be shown to be more than worth it.

There is one big question that all of this raises in our minds. Does God will or cause your cancer or the breakup of your marriage or your homosexual desires or the rebellion of your child or the loss of your job or some terrible accident?

The answer is a clear no, and yes. No, meaning God doesn't command or approve of sin and evil and He does not take delight in it. There is no sin or evil or darkness in God so He cannot be the source of such things. But the yes comes from God being able to prevent such things and when He doesn't means that it is in His will and furthermore God is in such control of them that He guides and directs them to a higher good and a higher purpose.

Like the goldsmith, God has His eye on the clock and the thermostat. He wants to refine, not destroy. He wants to remove impurities

Does this help you knowing that God is good and God is in control and that no matter how severe your trial is there is a God behind it who gives it purpose and meaning?

All things must work together for our good, so if it's not good, it's not over.

Trials don't destroy inexpressible anticipated joy.

I Peter 1:8-9 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter tells them what they are. "You are loving Jesus, you are believing Jesus, you are enjoying Jesus, you are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of your souls." Peter is giving them the standard, the benchmark, the definition of what it means to be a Christian.

How do we get a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory? How do we get a joy that is over the top? How do we get a joy that is not derailed by suffering and stress and sin?

Our joy will be like whatever we desire or crave. If we crave sexually provocative or suggestive or explicit books or movies or TV shows or pictures our heart will be polluted and our joy will be foul. If we crave violence and cruelty and revenge our hearts and joy will look like that. If we crave materialism and whatever can be found at the mall or Home Depot or Cabelas our hearts and joy will shrivel up. We will reflect and become like whatever we most desire.

Peter says that Christian joy is inexpressible and full of glory, and the path to that kind of joy is to make Jesus our greatest treasure. To be a Christian is to crave Christ and when we do that we will increasingly become like Him.

Jesus' joy and glory are supreme; there is no more joyful or glorious being in the universe than God. Love and believe and trust in Jesus that your joy may be complete and glorious.

God will use trials to draw us to the source of our only true joy.

Implications and Applications.

Do you see your suffering as Peter does in Scripture? Do you see them as necessary, varied but limited in duration, hard but refining and purposeful. Or do you see them as irritations, annoyances, unfair, undeserved, a hindrance to living life the way you want?

This understanding of spiritual joy and its deep roots is meant to give us perspective in our trials and hope for the future and total dependence of God in the midst.

When we get to that place where we truly believe that all trials are necessary trials for the sake of our salvation and faith, then we can see through to the joy on the other side.

Parents, don't try to build heaven here on earth. Don't try to give your kids a sense that they are living in paradise or in the best of all possible worlds. Some people think Lynden is a little oasis or utopia on earth but we need to burst that bubble.

One way we try to bring heaven down is our relentless pursuit of the American Dream and of being happy as much as possible and having whatever makes us most happy. We want to give our kids everything we didn't have or give them as many choices as possible. We try to insulate them from difficulties or adversity or failure or suffering or sacrifice.

This is not heaven and we aren't there yet. Whatever heaven we could build here will be a poor reflection of the real one. Make sure that our kids understand that nothing here comes close to comparing to what is to come.

In this life we will have afflictions and tribulations, hardship and heartache. In this world accidents happen, people get cancer even at a young age, houses burn down, people commit terrible sins against each other, people kill people, sometimes over religion.

We live in a world that is increasingly at odds with Christian values and morals. God's truth is a lightening rod for persecution. We aren't meant to fit in or to conform to this world.

Parents should parent with eternity in mind. Parents and grandparents, use our time in I Peter to prepare your children to suffer for Christ. Christ suffered and it isn't strange but normal for Christians in most of the world to suffer. As you teach them what to do in case of fire, teach them what to do in God's refining fire.

Persecuted Church Sunday

Today is the international day of prayer for the persecuted church, a day to raise awareness of our brothers and sisters who are suffering and dying for Jesus.

Over 70% of Christians in the world live with some kind of religious restriction or persecution. Come back this evening and bring your kids so they have a clear understanding of what it means to have a tested and refined faith, the kind of faith that will be honored and praised and gloried when Jesus is revealed.

Prayer:

Holy Father, thank you that because of the glory of your all-sufficient grace in our lives we can say thank you in the midst of everything that goes wrong in our world and in our own lives and bodies. You have given every pain a purpose to the glory of your grace, you have sanctified every suffering that we be more like Christ and our faith more like pure gold. You have carried us in your arms through the fiercest storms. You have never failed us, you are not failing us now and you never will. Increase our joy as we fix our eyes on Jesus who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. And now bless our Harvest Dinner, those who prepared it and are serving it.