

Testing Faith

1 Peter 1:6,7

I. Joy And Grief

Rejoicing In What?

Peter starts verse six by making an observation. He writes, **“In this you greatly rejoice.”** In what? In what Peter had been previously teaching in the first few verses. Namely that God has called us out of the darkness to walk in the light of His law, ever covered by the sprinkled blood of Christ. We rejoice greatly in the knowledge that, according to God’s abundant mercy, He made us alive, giving us a spiritual birth resulting in a living hope. This hope has as it’s power the resurrection of Jesus Christ and has as it’s result an inheritance that is the glory of heaven itself. Finally we rejoice in the knowledge that God keeps or guards us in this hope by keeping our faith alive through nothing less than His own power.

Joy And Grief

Peter finishes verse six by making another observation. He writes, **“Though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials.”** Although they are presently rejoicing, Peter does not deny the reality of another condition, one of grief due to various trials. What we learn initially is that these two conditions are not mutually exclusive but can coexist. To rejoice means to have joy or happiness or to delight. Grief, on the other hand means to have pain or distress. It would probably be helpful for us to figure out how this works.

Keeping An Endocrine Balance

A concept often been foisted upon the Christian community is that we must always have a visceral feeling of happiness. In order for me to feel right about my Christian faith I must maintain a proper endocrine balance. I was at a youth worker’s conference one year and the speaker chided the audience that if we had the joy of Christ somebody ought to tell our faces. In other words, as Christians we are obliged to walk around with smiles all day long. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy smiling and think we should smile and laugh as much as possible. But I can’t imagine that the Apostle Paul, even though he desired to share in the sufferings of Christ, smiled during his regular floggings. According to this view my feeling of grief is an indicator that I am not in a right relationship with God. And since I am not in a right relationship with God I am feeling more grief and the helix continues until I hit rock bottom and realize that the Christian faith is simply not working for me.

This puts an amazing amount of pressure on the Christian and on his pastor. You need to make sure you always feel happy in order to feel right about your Christian faith. And your pastor needs to make sure you’re always happy or you might leave the church for another church that yields greater residuals of happiness, or heaven forbid, you start looking for happiness in the venues of godlessness i.e., sex, drugs, rock and roll and the internet.

God's Sovereignty

So how do rejoicing and grief coexist? They can only genuinely coexist if we recognize the sovereign providence of God. The fact that God works out all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11) on behalf of His bride the church (Ephesians 1:22, 23). The various trials that I am going through are not the random happenings of an ungoverned universe but are the detailed design and orchestration of my Father in heaven. In these trials He is refining me into the image of His Son who Himself was perfected through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). Therefore I do not need to pretend that life isn't hard in order to have a proper perspective about my Christian faith. Life may in fact be very hard but it all means something.

Waterfalls And Crashing Jets

I may be in a canoe gently flowing down a peaceful stream and then made aware of the fact that the stream ends at Niagara Falls. At this point I may be re-routed to a less peaceful stream that ends at a beautiful pond. In this case even if the new stream contains level five rapids and I am being beaten to and fro I can view every bruise I get as a reminder that I am headed for life rather than death. As it is recorded in Acts, **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22)**. The tribulations are grievous but the rejoicing comes when we meditate upon why the tribulations exist. No matter how many rocks I run into I joyfully prefer my present route over the alternative.

I may be very comfortable riding first class in a 747 but if I find that the jet is going to run out of fuel in fifteen minutes and I must be part of a mid-air transfer to an old, rickety, uncomfortable, but reliable, prop-jet that will take me safely to the ground, the discomfort of the ride is something I will not find troubling in the least if I have any vision at all.

A Defined Purpose

But it is not just a matter of the entrance into the kingdom of heaven being difficult for difficult sake as if it were some a hazing initiation into some sort of celestial fraternity. Hebrews 12 tells us that God disciplines His children. Discipline isn't just for the sake of punishment but has a defined purpose. When Peter writes **“If need be”** we must recognize that the need be. In a verse that should make us a little more comfortable not always feeling happy the author of Hebrews writes,

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

Chastening doesn't always seem joyful but we are trained by it and it yields something -- the peaceable fruit of righteousness. In the context of 1 Peter there is a very specific aspect of our Christian faith that God is refining through the manifold trials we experience. Peter covers this in verse seven.

II. Refining Faith

Precious Faith

Peter parenthetically compares our faith to gold; historically recognized as a precious and enduring metal. He writes, **“That the genuineness of your faith, *being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*”** We should deem our faith more precious than gold. As I mentioned last week, I believe Christians underestimate the value of the presence of faith in their lives. The fact that you and I believe in Jesus -- that the presence of believing exists in us -- is precious. Jesus died to deliver faith.

Tried Twice

Gold is valuable when you pick it up from the ground. It's inherent value is the very reason it is refined the way it is -- that it might become even more valuable. Faith is precious to God and should be precious to us. Therefore it should make sense to us that God would seek to refine such an excellent quality He has graciously given us.

Gold, as I understand it, is generally tried twice by fire. First to remove the dross (or worthless metals that formed on it) and secondly when a judgment is to be made of it's purity. I think both of these can be applied to the present text. Our faith is refined to remove the dregs of our unbelief and to test whether what we have is genuine faith at all.

Proven Faith

Why are we grieved by various trials? That the genuineness of our faith may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Since unbelief is a sin for which Christ died, faith is a virtue granted to Christians by the power of the cross. And since faith is a virtue it must be refined (or proved or proved genuine) like any other virtue. The manifold trials that God orchestrates for our lives tests, refines and proves the genuine (if it be genuine) nature of our faith. Faith, granted and maintained by Christ, does not fail. We may fail but our faith will not. An example of this is found in Luke.

“And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. 32 “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” 33 But he said to Him, “Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.” 34 Then He said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me” (Luke 22:31-34).

Jesus told Peter that He prayed for Him that his faith should not fail. Then Jesus said, “When you have returned, strengthen your brethren.” Returned from where? Failing! Peter failed but his faith did not. As opposed to Judas who did not have saving faith, Peter's faith was proven and strengthened.

III. Who Is Testing Whom?

Proving False Faith

Here is a great caution to the church. Many approach God (and at times He is billed this way) with the attitude that I will “give you a shot” and see if I am really experience the abundant life. If God doesn’t pay off then God fails the test and the patron takes his business elsewhere. But it is really quite the opposite. We are not testing God’s faithfulness in keeping us happy. He is testing (through manifold trials) whether or not our faith is genuine. And when a person turns their back on God due to the difficulties or temptations of life they proved something. They proved that they are still in the sin of unbelief and their faith (whatever it was) was not genuine. As John writes in First John.

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (1 John 2:19).

Through trials, therefore, genuine faith will grow stronger and hypocrisy will be exposed.

IV. The Praise Of God

Finally Peter writes that this genuine faith, that was proven genuine through the refinement of trials, **“may be found to the praise(or found to result in praise... -- NASV), honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”** In other words the refinement of our faith through the trials we go through today will, on judgment day when we stand before God, result in praise, honor and glory.¹ One of the reasons why Roman Catholics (although I think they’re mistaken) consider weddings a sacrament is because they are a picture of the last day. Paul writes to the Ephesians,

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

The Wedding

The wedding is a picture of the pure bride, represented by a white gown, being presented to her groom which is Christ. He has exercised His sacrificial love to bring her to Himself in eternity holy and without blemish; not the least of which would be the blemish of unbelief. And as amazing as it might seem, God will give out praise, honor and glory on that day.²

¹ I might point out that there is a requirement of a proper response to trials on our behalf. The cursing of God’s providence through trials will not result in refinement. It is the behavior of faithless heathens.

² The verse doesn’t indicate who gets the praise, honor and glory. Clearly God will receive this throughout eternity. Romans 2:29; 1 Corinthians 4:5 and 1 Peter 5:4 indicate that God will give this out as well.

Robin Hood

Trust in God is precious to God. I am reminded of one of my favorite childhood movies - *Robin Hood* -- starring Errol Flynn and Basil Rathbone. I don't mean to be corny but sometimes I can best understand deep spiritual truths through the a childhood experience. King Richard the Lion Heart had left his kingdom on a crusade. Having been gone for years his evil brother subdued the throne and sought to usurp the authority of Richard. The battle between Robin of Loxley and the king's evil brother made up the bulk of the movie. The king himself never appeared until the very end when disguised in a cloak was captured by Robin himself and brought to Sherwood. The king recognized that the rebels of Sherwood were his only loyal subjects. The movie culminated with the king revealing himself for who he was and praising the genuine faithfulness of his loyal subjects. "All these have remained faithful" he stated. Then came the rewards and the sentencing. Faithfulness is precious to God and is rewarded.

Trusting Over Knowing

One more thing about faithfulness. We often wonder why we go through what we are going through and would like God to somehow grant an explanation. We think to ourselves, "If I only knew why I had this awful thing happen to me it would be easier to bear." Sometimes God grants this information and sometimes He doesn't. But I must realize that my lack of knowledge as to why something is taking place in no way removes the efficacy of God's refining work in my life. As C. S. Lewis stated, "I needn't know what vitamins are in the meal for the vitamins to nourish me, I simply must eat the meal."

And I might take it one step further. It has been said,

"It is in times when the reason for hardship cannot be seen that trust in God alone seems to become most pure and precious in His sight. Such faith He will not forget, but will store up as a jewel of great value and beauty to be displayed and delighted in on the day of judgment."³

Caring What God Thinks

So how do we rejoice through grievous trials? By recognizing God has His providential, Fatherly hand in virtually every detail of our lives. Nothing slips by Him. Nothing escapes His Fatherly attention. He is in fact forming Christ in us (Galatians 4:19) and we can rejoice in the knowledge that He will succeed. To hypocrisy and faithlessness He is a consuming fire. To faithfulness He is a refining fire. How do we rejoice through manifold trials? We simply have to care what He thinks.

³ Wayne Grudem's Commentary on First Peter, pp. 65.