

Fashioned in Fire

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 4

Deuteronomy 8:1-6; 1 Peter 1:3-12

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“The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. ² And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ⁴ Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. ⁵ Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. ⁶ So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. (Deuteronomy 8:1-6, ESV)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:3-12, ESV)

In 1953 Aleksandar Solzhenitsyn lay sick in the surgical ward of one of the infamous soviet forced labor camps known as the “Gulag.” A philosophically minded atheist, his criticisms of Joseph Stalin landed him in the prison system for enemies of the state several years prior.

In his now famous work recounting his experience, *The Gulag Archipelago*, he tells of a brief, life-changing story about a personal experience while on his sick bed, when he is visited by a Jewish convert to Christianity, Dr. Boris Kornfeld.

It is late at night and all the hospital is asleep. But Kornfeld sits next to Solzhenitsyn and shares the story of his coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Kornfeld's words of testimony would be the man's last. Solzhenitsyn writes,

I was wakened in the morning by running about and tramping in the corridor; the orderlies were carrying Kornfeld's body to the operating room. He had been dealt eight blows on the skull with a plasterer's mallet while he still slept... He died on the operating table, without regaining consciousness. And so it happened that Kornfeld's prophetic words were his last words on earth. And, directed to me, they lay upon me as an inheritance. I lay there a long time in that recovery room from which Kornfeld had gone forth to his death, and all alone during sleepless nights I pondered with astonishment my own life and the turns it had taken.

Solzhenitsyn's own conversion to Christianity was drawing nigh, and he would write in a poem one night on that sickbed:

And now with measuring cup returned to me,
Scooping up the living water, God of the
Universe! I believe again! Though I renounced You,
You were with me!

He concludes this passage of his own joyous conversion happening amid such suffering and sorrow thus:

I ... have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation:
'Bless you, prison, for having been my life!'¹

"Bless you, prison, for having been my life." Like so many stories of Christian conversion and Christian life, Solzhenitsyn's testimony joins the seemingly irreconcilable themes of suffering and joy. It reveals that mysterious, yet magnificent, Christian truth that God does some of His most profound work on the human soul amid the darkness of affliction—amid our own prisons.

I rarely hear a person say that the deepest and most meaningful aspects of their lives happened during the seasons of the most tranquility and ease. Rather, as Charles Spurgeon once said, “They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.”

For Christians, joy and suffering are not incompatible. Rather, as the medical missionary Paul Brand wrote in his book, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*, “pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined. Nearly all my memories of acute happiness, in fact, involve some element of pain and struggle.”² The work of God in our lives, which elicits the deepest joys, often happens in the midst of struggle and pain.

Joy in suffering is one of the dominant themes in 1 Peter. Peter has learned this truth from watching His Lord, Jesus, taste His own deepest joy by laying down His life for His Father and His followers. And from experiencing the joys of obedience to God in his own life, worked out amid the hardships we read of in the book of Acts.

But now his readers need to learn this lesson—that pain and joy kiss in the Christian life. Peter makes plain that suffering is and will be part of his readers lives, with no less than seventeen verses referring to forms of trials, afflictions, or tests.³

Introducing the theme for the first time now in verses 6-9, he opens verse six by stating the joy they have in the call of God on their lives, “You rejoice in” these glorious truths of your new birth and new hope. But then then the other shoe drops, “though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials” (1:6). In the face of these afflictions, Peter will speak of, in verse 9, a joy that Christians have which is so deep it cannot be expressed in words and is filled with glory: “you rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1.9).

This theme of joy in the midst of various trials rings again in chapter 4:12-13,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **But rejoice** insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also **rejoice** and be glad when his glory is revealed.

In our passage, Peter opens a window onto **why** Christians can rejoice in suffering.

- **Momentary:** Along with the fact that Christians can know that their suffering is not final, but only momentary—which is why Peter says, “though now, for a little while, you have been grieved”— is a tremendous truth to keep before us in sorrow. Suffering is not the final word!
- **Purposeful:** But along with this future termination of suffering, Peter explains a present purpose. Through affliction, God does some of His most significant work within us.

You can hear how he explains this in verses 6-7:

“...you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ 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.

The little phrase “**so that**” in verse 7 introduces a divine purpose within the present pain. These hardships are so that Christian faith will be tested and formed and eventually result in praise and honor. In the furnace, God’s fashions His people.

Drawing from these verses, we should consider three ways God works on us in pain: In the furnace, God fashions (1) Faith, (2) Fortitude, and (3) The Most Intimate of Fellowship.

I. In the Furnace, God Fashions Faith

In the heart of our passage, Peter uses a rich image to describe what’s happening amid his reader’s hardships; it’s the image of a fiery furnace that purifies gold:

“... though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ 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 (1 Peter 1:6-7)

The image of the refining of gold in fire was common in the world of Peter. It noted the simple observation that fire tests and improves gold by exposing foreign elements within it and purging them out, all by extreme heat. Thus Seneca, the Roman statesmen and contemporary of Peter, wrote, “fire tests gold, affliction [tests] strong men.”

This image was also common in Peter's own Jewish background: In the prophet Malachi we read that God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD" (Malachi 3:3).

The fire of a forge, when precious metal is placed into it, serves several interrelated purposes, two of which involved **exposing** and **purging**.

What's quite helpful about Peter's words here, is that he draws our attention to a specific aspect of us that is being exposed and purged while in the furnace—namely, faith. Faith is our trust in God; our trust that God will take care of us, and our trust that God has good planned for us and will satisfy us.

In the fire of a trial, our faith is exposed. We discover if we really trust God or not, only when that trust is tested. Faith and trust do not operate in a vacuum. Just like no man or woman develops patience or contentment unless they are put into a situation that may give rise to impatience or discontent; so too, a deep trust in God, a true faith in Christ, cannot develop outside of circumstances that test that trust, that expose whether it is genuine.⁴ In the fire of a trial, foreign elements in our faith are purged. We may think our greatest trust is in God, when we are mainly trusting in our own strength. But when our strength is broken in a trial, any false sense of self-confidence is purged from us when we must cling to God alone.

What do you ultimately trust in? What, or whom, are you ultimately trusting in? When the things we trust in for ultimate joy or ultimate safety or ultimate meaning are not God, God will allow us to experience the fractures and inadequacies of these realities. Such experiences are painful—but they are the purging of all foreign elements in our faith—all elements that are not trusting ultimately in God.

Why does God work on our faith like this? To answer this question, we need to ask what God takes greatest pleasure in. What about us makes God happy? This passage teaches us that God finds incredibly precious the faith of His people: a total trust in Him from His people honors Him and warms his Heart.

This is why Peter says that refined faith results in "praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). We almost always read in Scripture that we show God praise and glory and honor. But here, it is God who is giving the praise and honor and glory to us. This is amazing. And it is our faith that causes God to stand up at the end of time and praise His people—to say to us, "well done, good

and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). God refines our faith in the fire of affliction because our faith is more precious than gold.

Let me ask you a question. If you could pick between earning 100 million dollars over the next ten years but ending that period with relatively weak faith in God, or, struggling to make ends meet over the next ten years but developing an incredibly powerful faith in God during that time, which would you choose? *What is more valuable to you? 100 million dollars or strong faith?* In God’s eyes there is no contest. The money burns up like the paper that it is, but the faith endures and is praiseworthy.

Our trust in God is precious to God. Our faith in God’s Son, God’s promises, and God’s character is of infinite eternal worth. And the furnace of affliction is where the quality of faith is exposed, and foreign elements from it purged—all to make it genuine in the eyes of God.

Along with exposing and purging, however, the fire of a furnace also forms. It is the place where precious metals are shaped into stronger and more beautiful form.

II. In the Furnace, God Fashions Fortitude

Thus, along with this cleansing of faith, the furnace of testing forms character—especially regarding fortitude. Peter wants his readers to not give up. He wants them to follow Christ faithfully unto the end. This will require fortitude, or strength; and this can only be formed by bearing up in hard circumstances.

This was the case for one of Tolkien’s favorite characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee. Sam, passing through his own furnace and test of faith, comes out more like a rock.

But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength . . . and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue.⁴

Do you know any really faithful, strong Christians? They are battletested. Their faith was not built overnight, nor was it founded in seasons of ease. Ask them sometime; they’ll tell you. Their faith was forged in the fire. So, in hardships, Peter says, rejoice, because God is at work on you, fashioning your faith, and fashioning your fortitude—making you into His glorious and treasured possession.

As we move to mark a third way God fashions us in the furnace of affliction, I want to pause to note a possible roadblock. And this has to do with certain forms of suffering that are seemingly unbearable. There are certain storms of affliction within which we can still see. Yes, the winds are high, and the waves crash over us, but we can still make enough sense out of things and find enough hope that we can see. But there are other storms when we get entirely submerged. We are underwater. The pain is so horrible that we can neither see nor breathe. Some of you are experiencing things like this right now. For you to hear that God is at work in this to test your faith may simply sound cruel—nothing to rejoice over. This is where we need to notice another aspect of how joy works in Christian suffering—especially when it’s extremely hard. And this has to do with a type of fellowship available to the one who knows so much darkness. In the furnace, God fashions the most intimate of fellowship—Union with His suffering son.

III. In the Furnace, God Fashions the Most Intimate of Fellowships—Union with His Suffering Son

In verse 8, Peter states another seeming paradox: even though these Christians cannot see Jesus, they have affection for him:

⁸ 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.

I think Peter is referring to the fact that these Christians did not see Jesus during His earthly ministry—which Peter had the privilege of doing. And they do not see Jesus at present. This “absence” of Jesus requires a unique type of faith and makes endurance in suffering very strong.

But if we recall what Peter says in chapter 4 verses 12-13, we discover a profound link between the current experience of a Christian and an encounter with the heart Jesus: Peter writes in 4:13,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings**, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Peter says we “share Christ’s sufferings.” The verb he uses is **κοινωνέω** (koinoneo; koy-no-neh’-o), which is the verbal form of the noun, **κοινωνία** (koinonia; koy-nohn-ee’-ah). This is the term the New Testament uses for **fellowship**. In Acts 2:42 the early Christians “devote themselves to the apostles’

teaching and the **fellowship**.” In 1 Corinthians 1:9 Paul says that “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the **fellowship** of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”.

For Peter to use this term to speak of us “sharing Christ’s sufferings” draws us into a profound truth that the early Christians discovered: In suffering—especially when this suffering is due to our faithfulness to Christ amid a broken world—we are drawn into a secret place where our hearts touch the heart of the Man of Sorrows.

In your darkest pain, when you plead, “My God, remove this cup from me, please.” Your heart is next to the heart of our Lord, as He knelt in Gethsemane, sweating drops of blood.

When you cry out from the depths of your soul, “my God my God, why have you forsaken me.” You have been taken, emotionally, into the heart of the suffering Son of God, who cried these very words as the waves of sin and death submerged Him on the cross—cutting off even His sight of the Father.

When you feel as though you’ve been laid in the tomb dead, forgotten by God and friends, you lay next to the bosom of your Dear Lord and Friend, Jesus, and like Jesus, you can only hope now in God.

Especially when all the lights go out, and it is all black and dark, in your suffering, God is fashioning for you the most intimate of fellowships—union with His Suffering Son.

Two Notes of Application:

1. Keep praying.
2. Hold someone’s hand.

The Puritan preacher, Samuel Rutherford apparently said, “when put into the cellars of affliction, he’d come to find that it was there that the King keeps his choicest wines.”

Be prepared, faithful Christians, for the fiery trial. And in it and through it, know the deep and lasting joy of the fashioning hands of God, and of the deepest of fellowship with His Son. The work of God in our lives, which elicits the deepest joys, often happens in the midst of struggle and pain.

Endnotes

1. Aleksandar Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1918-1956: "An Experiment in Literary Investigation", Parts III-IV; vol. 2; trans. T. P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 612-615.
2. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, "And God Created Pain: A world famous surgeon's appreciation for the gift nobody wants," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 1994.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1994/january10/and-god-created-pain.html> Accessed May 15, 2021.
3. E.g., 1:11; 2:19, 20, 21, 23; 3:14, 17, 18; 4:1, 12, 15; 5:10
4. See Charles Simeon, "No man can exercise the grace of patience, or of contentment, unless he be in a situation that may give rise to impatience or discontent: nor can faith be known to exist in the heart, unless there be some circumstances that give scope for the manifestation of it; but temptations, especially such as produce much grief, can be surmounted only by strong faith. (143).
5. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Houghton Mifflin, one volume edition, 1994), p. 913.