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The Valley of Suffering, 2

1 Peter 4:12-19

In C. S. Lewis' classic, *The Problem of Pain* he described the impact of fiery trials in the life of the believer:

I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contentedly fallen and godless condition, absorbed in a merry meeting with my friends for the morrow or a bit of work that

tickles my vanity to-day, a holiday or a new book, when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain that threatens serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction, sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down. At first, I am overwhelmed, and all my little happinesses look like broken toys. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world and my only real treasure is Christ. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys. (Lewis, 2015, p. 106)

Such is human nature! We easily forget the promises that accompany the trials ordained by God. We forget the scriptures, sermons, hymns, and lessons that have taught us the purpose of testing and the outcome of suffering. Such that when the trial subsides, it isn't long before we return to patterns of thinking and living that set us up for another surprise attack when the inevitable fire returns.

Peter wrote to Christians who faced desperate circumstances on account of the Neronian Persecution. In our text, he cycles back to one of the major themes of this epistle: Hope in Hurtful Times — giving us words of instruction to help us NOT merely survive the flames BUT thrive in their midst (think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed Nego)!

Peter began this section with “Beloved”! Recall, God's holy response to a sinful being is either wrath or cleansing — which translates to one of only two possibilities. Either the sinner will be condemned before God and suffer hell — on account of the wrath of God! Or he will be perfected — on account of the love of God!

It is the latter which is the focus of Peter in our text. Because we are “the loved of God,” our God is going to work in this life to perfect us! A loving Being could do nothing less!

Now, alongside this truth Peter gave us a second principle the we ought not to be surprised by suffering.

1 Peter 4:12b, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you... as though some strange thing were happening to you.”

The reason we ought NOT to be surprised by trial or difficulty is because this world is NOT our home! We are “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 1:1)! And if the world “hated Christ”, it will “hate all who follow Him” (John 15:18-20a)! Yet lest we despair, our God is great such that He takes that which would destroy the non-believer and uses it to temper us, and so mold and shape us to be the people of His calling.

The third principle we derive from this text is that suffering is ordained by God for our welfare.

1 Peter 4:12c, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes

upon you for your testing...”

From this text it is clear that somewhere between the start of the writing of this epistle to our text, the persecution which served as the impetus for this letter had come in full upon the people of God!

This “fiery ordeal” speaks of being burned alive (cf. Revelation 18:9, 18). Here it is used figuratively; yet the connotation is unmistakable: God’s people were in the midst of a very difficult providence — the heat was high and the pressure intense! YET they and we must understand that these “fires” are designed by God for our spiritual maturation, our growth in grace, and so our good! Consider the word for “fiery ordeal” (πύρωσις [*purōsis*]).

This has a rich, Old Testament backdrop.

Proverbs 27:21a, “The crucible is for silver and the furnace [the fire] for gold...”-

That is the word used in our text for “fiery ordeal”! From this I want you to see that “the fiery ordeal” referenced by Peter here is NOT generic persecution, BUT the tempering fire of the Jeweler!



Psalms 66:10, “For Thou hast tried us, O God; Thou hast refined us as silver is refined.”

Silver is refined by heating it up to intense temperatures! That is the point and purpose of trial in the life of the believer! Because God in His love is all about our growth in grace, the “fiery furnace” will be a major theme of the Christian life!

Malachi 3:2b-3a, ...a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. And He will sit as a smelter [a gold smith] and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver...”

This is the connotation of “fiery ordeal” in 1 Peter 4. Accordingly, in Peter’s mind the focus here is NOT an independent, disconnected trial that simply reared its ugly head in the lives of God’s people, BUT something God ordained unto their “tempering”!

That is the word for “testing” in this text (πειρασμός [*peirasmos*]). Again, it is NOT a generic process that occasionally confronts the sinner. RATHER, this word *also* speaks of the goldsmith who creates a masterpiece with heat, fire, and friction, molding, and polishing (cf. James 1:3)!¹ Yet, how does this translate to our lives personally? Peter gives three specific by-products which accompany divine tempering. First, they enable us to rejoice in Christ when He comes in His glory.

1 Peter 4:13b, “But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.”

Peter is speaking of the Last Day when Christ comes back in His glory. At that time, we will “rejoice” in Him — that is, make much of Christ, exalt Him, praise Him, and so loudly proclaim our love for Him! That is what it means to “rejoice in Christ”!

You say, “How could we not? We will see Him in His glory!” Yet for the vast majority of people resurrected and standing before God in that day, Christ’s appearing will NOT be met with rejoicing, BUT anger, vile rantings, and cursing! Speaking of the last day, Christ said this:

Matthew 13:49-50, “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

From Acts 7:54, we know that “gnashing teeth” is a Hebraism denoting NOT pain, BUT hatred and anger! That is how the vast majority of those who have lived on this earth will respond to Christ at His Second Coming! Yet, for you and me, Christ’s return will be met with joy, rejoicing, adoration, and praise! Speaking of the last day, Isaiah wrote this:

Isaiah 25:9, “And it will be said in that day, ‘Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.’”

Now, why is that we will rejoice in Christ whereas the reprobate will not? It is NOT simply because we are the children of God, BUT, according to the text before us, it will ALSO be because through His tempering work, we will be brought to a place in our walks where all we could ever want is Him (cf. Hosea 3:4-5)! Listen to the testimony of Samuel Rutherford as he reflected upon this very truth. He wrote from personal experience.

Nay, whether God come to His children with a rod or a crown, if He come Himself with it, it is well. Welcome, welcome, Jesus, what way soever Thou come, if we can get a sight of Thee! And sure I am, it is better to be sick, providing Christ come to the bedside and draw by the curtains, and say, ‘Courage, I am Thy salvation,’ than to enjoy health, being lusty and strong, and never to be visited of God. (Rutherford, 1997, pp. XI, 52)

That is the point of God’s tempering grace! It enables us to rejoice in Christ at the Second Coming! Secondly, it brings us closer to God in the here and now.

1 Peter 4:14b, “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed [This does NOT mean “happy”. The word means ‘to be envied’! How is it that we are to be envied if we are persecuted for Christ?], because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

The picture is reminiscent of God’s shekinah glory descending on the temple.² Recall, when

the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Solomon's newly dedicated temple.

1 Kings 8:11, "...the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."

That is what occurs in the life of the believer when God places them in the crucible. The Lord draws close to the believer, holds his hand, wipes his brow, and issues the word of consolation and encouragement! And through this, we "...become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources."³ Yet there is more.

Do you see the word "rests" — "the Spirit of glory and of God RESTS upon you"? The Greek is ἀναπαύω (*anapauiō*) which is a word that means "to give relief, refreshment, intermission from toil."⁴ You know this word well! It is one and same as what is behind the "refreshment" we enjoy in Christ as a result of His salvation.

Acts 3:19-20, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord [what is the content of this 'refreshing'?]; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you."

This term is also behind the essence of the Sabbath (cf. Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14; Isaiah 14:4) whose "resting" speaks NOT of napping BUT investing in each other such that the body is refreshed (cf. Philemon 7, 20; 1 Corinthians 16:18; 2 Corinthians 7:13)

That is the blessing especially enjoyed by believers. When they are in the crucible: Refreshment! What an incredible blessing! And according to Peter, this blessing is especially enjoyed by the believer when He is tried, tempered, and so refined as gold.⁵ Swindoll wrote of this:

When faced with excruciating trials, we easily come to the end of ourselves. At that desperate point, we can quickly become mentally confused, emotionally drained, physically exhausted, and spiritually spent. From a purely human perspective, we often think this is the worst possible situation to be in. But from a divine perspective, this is the precise condition necessary to draw believers closer to God. We are never more dependent on the Holy Spirit's strength than when we've come to the absolute end of ourselves. (Swindoll, 2014, p. 220)

The Bible is filled with examples of this!⁶ We begin with Christ's promise in Matthew.

Matthew 10:19-20, "But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but *it is* the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

This is why they ought NOT to be anxious about what they will say. When the time of need is there, the Spirit of God will give us "grace to help" (Hebrews 4:16)! And herein we truly will be blessed. We see in Stephen's life. As he began to defend his faith before the Jewish leaders,

what do we read? They “saw his face like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). This is NOT natural — but a reflection of the presence of the Spirit of God! In response to this, the Sanhedrin became enraged at Stephen (as murderous thoughts entered into their minds). Yet, what was Stephen’s response?

Acts 7:55-56, “He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’”

Today our gaze would be at the risen Christ as He is revealed to us in Scripture (cf. 2 Peter 1:16-21)! And then, and quite unimaginably, as Stephen was stoned to death by his fellow countrymen, we read this:

Acts 7:59-60, [Stephen]“...called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep.”

When “the Spirit of glory and of God rested” upon Stephen, this weak and sinful man was elevated above his suffering to sweet relief! Now while the “peace of God which surpasses all comprehension” will NOT come to us the way it did to Stephen, nevertheless it will come to us in the fiery furnace! We see this “refreshing” grace in Paul’s life.

Paul, of all men, there is little question that Paul had a rather large share of suffering (read 2 Corinthians 11:23-30)! So, how is it that he could keep going and going in the ministry, never burning out? Listen to the testimony Paul gave in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 12:8-10, “Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

That is the refreshment that comes when “the Spirit of Glory... rests” on us — refreshment which, according to our text, comes in the valley of the shadow of death! That brings us to a final by-product of God’s temperings.

Third, fiery trials enable us to be “driven” by God.

1 Peter 4:16b, “But if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.”

Interesting! You may already know that the name “Christian” (~ little Christ) was NOT a name that early believers coined for themselves. RATHER, it was a name of derision given to the

followers of Christ (cf. Acts 11:26; 26:28). Yet Peter here calls us NOT to shrink back, BUT to willingly identify ourselves with One so contemptible to the world — “let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God!”

As you know, in the Jewish context, the word “glory” (כָּבֵד [kabad]) speaks of that which is of substance, weighty, or heavy. To translate it to modern thinking, “glory” is the impact of one’s footprint in/on this world! And so, to say that “God is glorious” is to say that God — unlike the idol — has a massive footprint! And so, He does! Unlike the idol which has NO impact as they are nothing, behold God. Isaiah describes it this way:

Isaiah 64:4, “For from of old they have not heard nor perceived by ear, neither has the eye seen a God besides Thee, who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.”

In this regard when the Bible speaks of “glorifying God” — giving Him weight/substance — it most certainly speaks of a life of praise. Yet more fundamentally- before this — it speaks of a life that is driven and so impacted by God! To “glorify God” is to live in light of the weightiness of His Being! And so:

- As He is holy, to “glorify God” means we don’t willingly participate in sin.
- As He is loving, to “glorify God” means that we don’t doubt our standing before Him every time we sin.
- As He is in control of all things, to “glorify God” means that we live NOT in worry or fear, BUT in trust and peace.

This and much more is what is meant when we are called in the Bible to “glorify God”!

In this regard, I want you to see that trial and persecution is the great leveler! It brings us to the point where we are stripped of all the distractions of life and so view it with sobriety. In the words of Anonymous: “...I never knew until one day by the grave how vain are things we spend our lives to save.”

In this regard, it is imperative therefore that we work with our suffering and so improve upon it. Like labor pains, let us NOT dread them, BUT when it comes, let us allow it to do their sobering work to make us view with contempt the pride of life, the folly of rebellion, and so the passing and shallow pleasures of sin. But also, to view with joy:

- The glory of the cross-work of Christ!
- The value and so importance of a life lived for God!
- The true treasure that is our in the Kingdom of God!
- The true value of the Pearl of Great Price!

This and so much more is what is behind the sovereignty of God’s tempering love!

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End Note(s)

¹ We've seen this word before. Speaking of the 2nd Coming of Christ, Peter wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith [the 'approving of our faith'], *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though 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) Recall what we learned when we examined this text. Divinely ordained trials- as in the tempering of precious metals- serves two purposes: (1) They are Designed to Ascertain What Someone Is. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:13 speaking of the final judgment, Paul wrote, "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is *to be* revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work." Clearly, in the Bible, "testing" is a term used with a goal of ascertaining the substance of a thing. God told Jeremiah, "I have made you an assayer *and* a tester among My people, that you may know and assay their way" (Jer. 6:27). God chose to use Jeremiah to test the mettle of the people of Israel. How they would respond to his ministry and message would indicate what they truly were before the Lord. Listen to the cry of the Psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me..." (Psalms 139:23-24a) David knew that part of God's sanctification involved being assessed via the flame of affliction! David welcomed that holy affliction. It is as the Persian Proverb goes, "Night hides the world, but reveals a universe." That is the idea behind this word! Yet there is another facet to this testing, (2) They are Designed by God to Determine what Someone Will Be! In James 1:2-3 we read, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." What was the purpose of the refining fire in Malachi? "And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness." (3:3) Speaking of the design behind tempering in relation to His people, the Lord said in Hosea 2:6-7, "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them but will not find *them*. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me than now!'"

That is what is behind tempering in the Bible! As we have yet to enter into glory and so to become that which God would have us to be, the Lord on account of His love tempers us to make us into "...a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21)! That is the thinking of Peter in the text before us. The "trial/test" here is that which NOT only ascertains what we are about BUT determines what we will be! Peter Davids wrote, "Thus these Christians are to see what is happening to them as a refining process that will reveal the genuineness of their faith (God's goal in allowing the test) and therefore be to their ultimate benefit." (Davids, 1990, p. 165)

² cf. Exodus 24:16-17; 34:5-8; 40:34-38; Hab. 3:3-4.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 106.

⁴ cf. Matthew 11:28-29; Mark 6:31.

⁵ John MacArthur wrote, "'Refreshment' comes on those believers who suffer for the sake of the Savior and the gospel. The Spirit gives them grace by imparting endurance, understanding, and all the fruit

that comes in the panoply of His goodness..." (MacArthur, 2004, p. 253)

⁶ Wayne Grudem wrote, "It is amazing to think that increased sufferings seem only to increase the believer's joy in the Lord, but Scripture testifies that this is so (Acts 5:41; cf. 16:25; Romans 5:3; Colossians 1:24; Hebrews 10:34)." (Grudem, 2009, p. 186)