

Refining Faith

I Peter 1:6-7

Polycarp was an early church father who holds a special place in church history. He was born in the year AD69 becoming a Christian sometime around the age of 30. He learned the gospel from the Apostle John and became an ardent supporter of the books of the New Testament confirming their authenticity.

Polycarp in turn mentored a young man by the name of Iranaeus, who became famous for his strong stance against heresy in the second century. As a disciple of John, Polycarp had the same gentle character as that of his mentor. Yet he remained unwavering in speaking against doctrinal error.

In time he became the bishop of the church in Smyrna, the same Smyrna of Revelation 2. In that letter dictated by John, Christ warned the church they were about to face persecution and promised a crown of life to those who were faithful unto death. As a beloved leader there, Polycarp no doubt encouraged the church with these words when several of his flock were hauled off by Roman soldiers to face death by wild beasts or fire.

The Roman mob eventually called for the death of their leader Polycarp. Friends persuaded him to flee to a farm house and hide. While praying, Polycarp had a vision and informed those who were with him "It must be that I shall be burned alive."

Torturing two slave boys, soldiers learned where he was hiding and sent men to arrest him. This time Polycarp refused to run saying, "the will of God be done." He ordered food to be set before the soldiers and asked for an hour in which to pray. His prayer was so impressive that the soldiers questioned their orders to arrest such a good man and granted him two hours of prayer with God before leading him back to town.

A magistrate ordered Polycarp to renounce Christ and give obedience to Caesar as lord. An eyewitness captured his answer: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How, then, could I blaspheme my King who saved me? You threaten the fire that burns for an hour and then is quenched; but you know not of the fire of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment. Bring what you will."

On February 23, 155 AD Polycarp died at the stake. It is said that miracles accompanied his death and the faithful collected his remains as relics. The church of Smyrna recorded all this in a letter they sent to sister churches.

Please turn in your Bibles to I Peter 1:6-7.
Stand as I read verses 3-7.

Preparing His disciples for His pending death, Jesus told them "In this world you will have trouble (tribulation). But take heart! (Be of good cheer!) I have overcome the world." John 16:33

Early in His ministry as Jesus spoke at what we call the Sermon on the Mount He made this statement: Matthew 5:10-12 "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Paul explained it this way: "Yes, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution." II Timothy 3:12

Now, not all followers of Christ will endure this kind of hardship, but it should be expected, the possibility exists and certainly we are seeing it before our very eyes in our own country through examples like the florist in Washington.

According to Open Doors Ministries each month 322 Christians are killed for the faith; 214 Churches or Christian properties are destroyed; and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians.

They define Christian persecution as any hostility experience from the world as a result of one's identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death are just a few examples of the persecution they experience on a daily basis."

"According to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world's population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions (and many of these people are Christians). Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ."

In our relatively safe environment living in the United States it is important, even imperative that we remember others who are undergoing some form of trial for their faith.

Peter is writing to encourage these dear believers in Asia Minor who are experiencing one form of persecution or another for their faith in Christ. It is an encouragement to stand strong in spite of the trials. We see in our text three important reminders about their faith.

It is a faith that is persecuted

It is a faith that is precious

It is a faith that is praised

They are great reminders to us as well.

I. IT IS A FAITH THAT IS PERSECUTED – v. 6

Peter seems here to present us with an oxymoron,

two opposing ideas. He instructs them to rejoice even when they are going through periods of grief or sorrow because of their trials. Delight and distress don't seem to go together.

Let's break it down and see what he is actually saying here.

We see right off the instruction to greatly rejoice. That phrase is one word in the Greek. Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest writes "Rejoice is from a Greek word speaking of extreme joy expressing itself externally in an exuberant triumph of joy."

King David gives us an example of what Wuest is describing about this kind of rejoicing.

II Samuel 6:12-15

David had attempted to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem but because the priests disobeyed God's instructions on how to transport the Ark God took the life of Uzzah when he reached out to steady the Ark as it tipped on the cart that was carrying it. The Law handed down to Moses by God strictly instructed the priests to carry the Ark on poles. They disobeyed God. For a time they abandoned the hope of bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and left it on the property of Obed-Edom. When David realized the mistake and why God dealt the way He did, he went up and brought the Ark to Jerusalem this time obeying the instruction given in the Law on how to transport the Ark. As the procession marched on David was so overjoyed that he danced before the Lord and Scripture says he did so with all his might. He rejoiced with everything he had. He put his whole heart into it.

This kind of rejoicing is never tentative or apprehensive. It is expressive and spontaneous. The word is in the present tense meaning it is something that is continuous here and now, not just reserved for when we get to heaven. That's the kind of rejoicing Peter is talking about. But I think any rejoicing we express here will pale in

comparison to what our rejoicing will be once we get to heaven. The word Peter uses always refers to joy that is spiritual rather than temporary. It is always used in reference to a relationship with God.

I Peter 1:8

Luke 1:47

Luke 10:21

Acts 2:25-28

Revelation 19:11

But what are we to rejoice in? Peter says to rejoice in “this”. But what is the “this” he is referring to? It is not the trials they were going through. Although we are instructed by Paul to “Be joyful always” and “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

(I Thessalonians 5:18)

So if it’s not the trial they were to rejoice in what then is Peter referring to?

If we go back to the previous verses we see what the “this” is.

V. 3 – God caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ.

V. 4 – God is keeping an inheritance for us in heaven that can’t perish, spoil, or fade.

V. 5 – God is keeping us for that inheritance.

Why greatly rejoice? Because of the incredible inheritance that awaits us that is kept by God.

Romans 5:1-2

In Romans 12:12 Paul tells us to “rejoice in hope.”

And in I Corinthians 15:51-58 Paul reminds us of the physical transformation that will occur to us when Christ returns, so that like Him, we will conquer death. In this we are to give God thanks for the victory we have in Christ Jesus. In this hope we are to stand firm.

We are to greatly rejoice now for the coming inheritance in spite of the trials that we are or will

encounter. We have a faith that is persecuted. But even knowing that trials may come, Peter gives us two very important reminders about these trials.

A. Trials Are Temporary

Peter says they are just for “a little while”. They aren’t going to last forever. Sometimes they may seem like they will. Sometimes it seems like the clock is standing still and there is no end in sight. But Peter says they won’t last, not in light of eternity. When we compare the length of time we spend on this planet to the time we will spend in heaven, it will seem like less than a moment.

Oft times the day seems long, our trials hard to bear,
We're tempted to complain, to murmur and despair;
But Christ will soon appear to catch His Bride
away,

All tears forever over in God's eternal day.

Refrain

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus,
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ;
One glimpse of His dear face all sorrow will erase,
So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

Life's day will soon be o'er, all storms forever past,
We'll cross the great divide, to glory, safe at last;
We'll share the joys of heav'n - a harp, a home, a
crown,

The tempter will be banished, we'll lay our burden
down.

Refrain

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus,
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ;
One glimpse of His dear face all sorrow will erase,
So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

II Corinthians 4:17-18 “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our

eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

The word Peter uses here refers specifically to suffering caused because of their faith. These trials are not from natural disasters or diseases or even God’s punishment because of some ongoing sin, unrepentant spirit.

It’s not referring to trials of an irritable boss or a flat tire or a lingering illness. Paul knew the kind of trial Peter was talking about. In Acts 16 we read that he and Silas were flogged severely because of their faith. In II Corinthians 6 he recounts the trouble, hardships and distresses, beatings, imprisonments and riots all for the sake of Christ. When James refers to the trials we encounter he is speaking of things that come from the outside. In Acts 5:41 we see the Apostles rejoicing after time in prison “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

If and when trials come, remember this from the pen of Peter, they are only temporary.

The word “trial” means the act of putting something or someone to the test with a view of determining whether it is worthy of being approved or not, the test being made with the intention of approving if possible.

The word was used in secular Greek to examine candidates for the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Job understands this kind of test. Job 23:10-12 “But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed His steps; I have kept to His way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my daily bread.”

Warren Wiersbe has written that “A faith that

cannot be tested is a faith that cannot be trusted.”

These trials are a test to determine the degree and depth of our faith.

Peter says this is only temporary.

Peter says there are all kinds, they are diverse.

B. Trials Are Diverse

That means they come in all sizes and shapes. The word actually means many colored or simply many types.

Again, referring to James 1:2, we face trials of many kinds not necessarily referring to the number of them but rather to the fact that there will be a variety or diversity, all types and degrees intended to test and strengthen our faith.

Peter says that in these trials we will suffer grief or sorrow. This is not referring to physical pain, although that may be part of the suffering, but more specifically it refers to mental anguish that comes with the trial, like the mental anguish Christ suffered in the Garden as He prayed on the night He was betrayed. But keep in mind what Peter said in the first part of the verse that we should “greatly rejoice”. We have an inheritance waiting for us.

God’s grace will meet any trial. Paul was told by Christ “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9)

It is a faith that is persecuted. But if we left it there, we would have no comfort or hope, only despair. But there is joy to be found in trials because of our faith.

It is a faith that is precious.

What comes from such testing? We see it stated for us in verse 7.

II. IT IS A FAITH THAT IS PRECIOUS – v. 7a

“These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine...”

The KJV says “more precious than gold.”
What comes from such testing?

A. Trials Purify Our Faith

To become pure gold had to be heated up so that the impurities within the precious metal would float to the top to be skimmed off. If other metals were mixed in with it the gold was less valuable. So the assayer would heat it up to determine the metal’s purity, its content, and then its value.

It was a term God used with the nation of Israel.
Exodus 16:4
Deuteronomy 8:2-3

Job used the same analogy when referring to God testing him. (Job 23:10)

We sang that wonderful chorus *Refiner’s Fire*.
Purify my heart let me be as gold and precious silver
Purify my heart, let me be as gold, pure gold.

Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
is to be holy
set apart for You Lord.
I choose to be holy
set apart for you my master,
ready to do your will.

Purify my heart, cleanse me from within and make me holy.
Purify my heart, cleanse me from my sin, deep within.
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What a great prayer. What a great longing. But are we willing to go through the refining process to have a faith, a heart that is pure and holy? That chorus says it’s a choice we make to allow God to do the work of an assayer in our life to remove the

impurities that we might become more like Him in character through these trials. *Trials reveal the impurities that need to be removed in order to become more mature in Christ.*

James 1:2-4 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.”

In purifying us trials are necessary for a number of reasons:

- 1) Trials humble us
Deuteronomy 8:3
II Corinthians 12:7-10
- 2) Trials wean us from worldly things and point us to heaven
John 16:33
Revelation 14:13
Job 19:25-27
- 3) Trials teach us to value God’s blessings as opposed to life’s pain
Romans 8:17-18
- 4) Trials enable us to help others
II Corinthians 1:3-7
Hebrews 13:3
- 5) Trials chasten us from sin
I Corinthians 11:30
Luke 15:16-18
Hebrews 12:5-12
- 6) Trials strengthen spiritual character
Romans 5:3
II Thessalonians 1:4-6
James 1:2-4
James 5:11
- 7) Trials perfect, confirm, strengthen, establish us
I Peter 5:10
Trials purify our faith.
Trials also prove our faith.

B. Trials Prove Our Faith

Again we come back to the idea of testing gold to determine its quality and its value.

Henry Ironside said “Faith must be tested, otherwise it could not be verified.”

So, think of the testing of your faith as the furnace by which your faith is being evaluated, verified, and valued.

There is that old adage “oh, what a difference a day makes.” One day Peter’s faith was weak resulting in his denial of the Lord. Another day, under severe testing he boldly preached to the religious leaders who jailed him and then the ultimate test came when he was martyred for his faith.

What test of faith will you encounter that will verify its worth? The fire of trials will separate true faith from faith that is superficial, faith that is fickle, faith that is fleeting, faltering, and failing.

For his faith Daniel faced the lion’s den.
For their faith Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fiery furnace.
For his faith John the Baptist faced the executioner’s sword.

The author of Hebrews (11:36-40) describes the faith of those who “faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were commended for their faith... God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

Trials purify our faith and prove our faith because our faith is of greater value than gold, it is more precious than gold. Peter says that gold, as precious a metal as it is, will perish, but not genuine faith, faith that looks forward to what is coming, faith that has great hope and assurance in a future that is not part of this world.

It is a faith that is persecuted.
It is a faith that is precious.
It is a faith that is praised.

III. IT IS A FAITH THAT IS PRAISED – v. 7b

In the last part of this verse we see both God’s response and God’s reward.

This is not our response of praise to God, although He is certainly worthy of all honor, glory and praise. It is instead God’s praise of us for a faith that has sustained us during the darkest times of the trials we encounter.

It is His commending us for a faith well lived.
It is hearing Him say “well done good and faithful servant.”

It is His approval of our faith.

When gold is tested, the assayer knows its purity when he can see his reflection in the metal.
Does God see His image in us?
Have impurities been removed from us so that He sees His reflection?
Will you receive His well-done good and faithful servant?

When our faith meets the test we encounter, it not only brings God glory, we receive His approval and we are honored by Him. A fire tested faith will not be forgotten by God. He will give praise, honor and glory for our faith. He will give to us His “well done good and faithful servant.” And we will receive the crown of glory that will never fade. I Peter 2:20 “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and enduring it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”

Walvoord and Zuck write “Though trials may cause temporary grief, they cannot diminish that deep, abiding joy which is rooted in one’s living hope in Christ Jesus.”

Are you letting trials purify and prove your faith?
Will you receive the reward of His approval?
To verify the value of our faith, it must be tested.
We may never undergo the type of trial that these believers experienced to whom Peter is writing or like that of others throughout church history. Our trials may be to a much lesser degree than theirs. Still, don’t complain about the trial you may be encountering. Make it a time of spiritual growth

that looks forward to an eternal gift rather than the temporary grief it is causing now.

Christian History posted this historical record. Diocletian became Emperor of Rome in 284 AD. Under him the empire experienced its cruelest and most systematic persecution of Christians. To share the load of governing he made Maximian his co-emperor and Galerius and Constantius junior emperors. To bind Galerius to himself, Diocletian gave his daughter Valeria as his wife. She was allegedly a Christian.

In 298 Diocletian required that all soldiers and imperial officials sacrifice to the heathen gods. Five years later Galerius, who was a cruel man and hated Christianity, met with his father-in-law and urged him to persecute Christians more harshly.

At first Diocletian resisted the idea. To persuade him, Galerius brought learned pagans to a conference. When the oracle of the sun god agreed with Galerius, Diocletian gave in. On February 23, 303AD he decreed that all who would not serve the gods of Rome should lose their offices, have their property seized, and be demoted if they were persons of rank. He forbade Christians to meet for worship, ordered churches destroyed, and their holy books burned. As soon as the proclamation was posted, Christians tore it down, and loudly reproached the Emperors. For this he was roasted alive over a slow fire, but died without uttering a groan. The church at Nicomedia was destroyed and its books burned.

Additional proclamations were issued against Christians. One ordered the imprisonment of Christian teachers, filling prisons with bishops and clergy. The next ordered they either sacrifice to the pagan gods or be tortured. The third directed that all Christians should be required to sacrifice on pain of torture. Christians suffered terribly, especially in the eastern empire. I will spare you the gruesome details of the kinds of torture they endure because of their graphic nature, but suffice it to say, it was despicable, even inhumane. Eventually remaining Christians were sent to work in the mines or given menial jobs.

Galerius persisted in his cruelty until, at the end of eight years, he found himself tormented with a

wasting disease. Evidently he saw this as a judgment from God, for he reprieved the Christians and implored their prayers. Despite his belated remorse, he died in agony. Maximian persecuted Christians just as severely as Galerius, but Constantius showed kindness to Christians, and his son Constantine later legalized Christianity and it is believed he embraced Christianity himself.

There will always be some form of trial. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”