

“Tested By Fire”

June 19, 2011

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Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 1:6-9, ESV

Born Again to a Living Hope

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.

What brings joy to your life? Recently Kimberly and I drove to Truman State University to pick up our son, Alexander, from school so he could spend the summer with us. That brought us joy.

Three weeks ago Kimberly and I picked up our son, Daniel, at the Peoria airport and took him home to spend three whole weeks with us. That brought us joy.

Over one week ago, Kimberly and I traveled to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, with the youth group from Bethany. What an awesome group of teenagers we have. It was an amazing week. That brought us incredible joy.

This past Thursday I spent the morning playing tennis with my family. That brought me wonderful joy.

What brings you joy? All the joys I have mentioned are God-ordained and truly good. They are not counterfeit joys made of the cheap plastic of sin. These are joys which are real and authentic, but there is a problem with each of the God-given joys I have mentioned – they are all momentary. They are all fleeting and merely passing shadows of the eternal joy God purposes for us.

My son, Alexander, will return to school in August. Daniel flew to Colorado this past Friday. The week at summer camp ended as quickly as it began, and the tennis match melted away with the noonday sun. In addition, both of my older sons ran their poor dad all over the court and they were merciless in their victory over him. That is some Father's Day gift!

From the beginning of time, God designed us as men and women to experience joy and happiness. That is part of who we are created to be, for God Himself is a happy God, who, from the outset, planned and provided for us to experience delight throughout our lives. 1 Timothy 6:17 teaches us God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Remember at the beginning of creation, God told Adam he could eat from every tree in the Garden, except one. God could have fed man with one flavorless kind of food which merely sustained his physical body. He could have designed His creation that way, but He did not. Instead, God created unending variety and intense flavor for Adam to enjoy throughout his life.

Then God created woman for the man with the intention of removing the pain of isolation and giving to both Adam and Eve the joy of intimacy and the mystery of marital oneness, but these earthly pleasures were never intended to be the center of man's delight.

Through God's loving design, He purposes for us to experience joy primarily not through His provision, but chiefly through His person. That is the key element to joy in the Christian life. The chief end of man, the chief purpose, is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever and ever.

In the Garden, man's most satisfying joy was not in the gifts offered to them, but in the Giver who loved them. We recall Adam and Eve found the most rewarding pleasure from walking with God, personally, in the cool of the day, and fellowshiping with Him in sweet, personal communion.

God Himself is the River from which all real joys find their source. It is sin, death, brokenness, and pain which entered into the world when Adam and Eve decided they could find joy outside of God and outside of His provision. They began looking to a “thing” rather than to the One who created all things.

Peter urges us toward this joy in our text. He speaks in Verse 8 of a joy which is inexpressible and one which is filled with glory. Notice the Christian’s joy is not dependent upon pleasant circumstances in this world, for Peter is addressing an audience which was not experiencing pleasant circumstances. He says,

⁶ In this you rejoice...

He is writing to a people who are suffering persecution. They are plagued by the rejection of man everywhere in their world and they were rejected and despised because of their faith. They were hated because they loved Jesus. They were paying a severe and painful price for their allegiance and loyalty and love for their Lord.

In such circumstances, where their lives were racked with suffering, why should they rejoice? Their circumstances certainly were not joyful. How could Peter call them to rejoice in the midst of such misery? Peter is going to give them a foundation for their joy which supersedes circumstances and events of this world. He is going to remind them of three specific and vital truths.

The first truth is: The Christian's life is a joyful life; that is its very nature. We are not to be satisfied with anything less than a joyful life as Christians. The second truth is: The Christian's trials become a cause for more joy. Finally, the Christian's faith is the hand which embraces joy.

Joy for the Christian is not an addendum, it is not a supplement, nor is it a nice bonus to the few who can obtain it. Joy is intended to be the norm for the Christian. Joy is not side dish on God’s menu for us; joy is the main course! The fruit of the Spirit, the Bible teaches us, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control. Joy is part of our inheritance in Christ. It is to be experienced today and it is ultimately to be absolutely satisfied in the future. But, part of our birthright as children of God is to obtain and experience joy.

Furthermore, our joy is not weak joy like tea made with one quick dunk of the teabag in hot water. No, it is strong, vibrant, and abiding. All through Scripture God’s people are called to rejoice and to live lives of deep, satisfying joy. In the Book of Psalms, we read,

^{5:11} But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy...

^{32:11} Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

^{70:4} May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you! May those who love your salvation say evermore, “God is great!”

Isaiah the prophet says, in Isaiah 61,

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

The Apostle Paul, in Philippians 4, will write,

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Those are just a few of the hundreds of verses which describe the Christian life as one of joy.

When circumstances are so dark, how can a believer rejoice? Let us look at Peter’s words carefully to discover the answer. Peter writes,

⁶ In this you rejoice...

What does the word “this” refer to? We have to read Verses 3-5 to understand God sustains joy in the life and the heart of the Christian through the salvation He has given to us: “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, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Peter says, “Let us rejoice in our new birth, our living hope, our inheritance, indeed in our salvation!” God’s joy transcends our physical circumstances because it is rooted in our eternal life God has given us to connect us to Himself. Peter urges us to rejoice by fixing our eyes upon our salvation. When we lose our joy it is because we have lost our focus and sight of our salvation, the gift and treasure which is ours in Christ.

There are three specific aspects of salvation Peter wants us to consider as we pursue and embrace joy. The first is: God cleanses our past sins. Peter points to the cleansing of our sin in Verse 3, when He writes, “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again.” The word “mercy” calls attention to our dismal state prior to being given new life, prior to being born again. Mercy reveals we were criminals condemned under the righteousness of God and under His just Law. We needed to be born again because our sins kept us from life with God.

The Apostle Paul will say, in Ephesians 2,

² And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind...⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...

Paul is talking about the same kind of mercy and the same kind of life. He is referencing what our sins did in affecting our soul; they killed us and kept us from ever enjoying God, ever seeing Him, ever hearing His voice, and ever from a relationship. A dead person cannot have a relationship because they cannot see the other, cannot hear the words, and they cannot talk and communicate. Paul and Peter say that is where we were spiritually.

In salvation, God removed the cause of our separation from Himself. God removed the obstacle which kept us from having joy and finding our joy in Him. God removed that which removed us from our designed joy God intended for man to experience all through life. Peter will talk more about this issue of our cleansing from sin, in Chapters 2 and 3,

^{2:24} He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

^{3:18} For Christ also suffered once for sins, that he might bring us to God and bring us back to our joy in him...

As long as sin is attached to us we can never have joy, and our present and our future will be filled with suffering. It is a suffering which removes us from God Himself and the greatest joy.

Do you rejoice that you have been cleansed in your sin and you have been forgiven? Does that thought take your breath away, that you have the guilt of your sin removed, and the shame of your sin, and power of sin completely destroyed in your life as a result of Jesus precious work? Does that cause your heart to swell up and say, “I rejoice in God my Savior!”? It does for me.

Not long ago, my son, Jackson, and I were singing the song “O Happy Day” in our van. We stopped in a parking lot and Jackson was really getting into it as he stepped out of the van. His junior high voice cracked right as he was turning and belting out, “When Jesus washed . . .” He almost bumped into a woman he did not see walking within two feet of him and she kind of jumped. We all laughed and Jackson continued singing. It is good for us to rejoice in our salvation and we have been forgiven. It is amazing it has happened to us.

The second principle Peter wants us to understand is: God secures our future inheritance, and this seems to be Peter’s main focus, that we have been born again

⁴ ...to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...

No matter what suffering we experience in the present, we can look past them to a future that is wonderful beyond description! We have a salvation which is going to explode in wonder and beauty in the last day! God has that treasure for us safeguarded. He safeguards the inheritance and He guards over you so you remain in the faith all the way to the end and you will be able to experience it in its fullness. Nothing can rob us of God's sweet gift of Himself, not now, not then, not ever. God's gift of Himself to us is perfectly and absolutely secure.

Then Peter says he wants us to think about God designs our present sufferings. Everything about our salvation is designed by God to display His glory and to bring us joy. That includes the sufferings God placed upon Jesus to bring about our salvation. It also includes the sufferings God places in our path to bring us along in salvation toward Christ-likeness. Everything, from the beginning to the end, is designed by God to display His glory and to bring us joy. God elects us to salvation according to His foreknowledge. God causes us to be born again to a living hope. God guards us by His power to keep us forever with Him.

Do you believe the God who designs everything regarding our salvation would be haphazard in the events which come into His children's lives? Our sorrows are not random or arbitrary. They are designed by a wise Father to help His children experience the joy of their salvation and the joy of God Himself. Our sufferings are part of His good and loving design.

How do we know God designs our sufferings? The Word of God teaches us that. Notice the words Peter uses. The Bible tells us it is important to observe terms and words because each word is vital to the meaning and understanding. In Verse 6 we read,

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary ...

The words, "if necessary" are important. At the beginning of Verse 7, Peter says, "so that". These are words which point to God's invisible hand moving in our trials, not merely allowing them but fashioning them for His joyful purposes. Peter is teaching us God is in control of all trials and He sends those trials to us only when they are necessary for our joy. They are painful for a time, to be sure, but we do not want to minimize the pain trials bring to our lives, but they are necessary.

Who are they necessary to? They are necessary for us! Who is in charge of determining that? It is God. Every parent knows what "if necessary" means regarding painful suffering they bring or design for their children's lives. We parents sometimes must choose pain for our sons and daughters in order to secure their future joy from the very beginning of life. It is tough bringing your precious, little baby into the doctor for the first immunization shot. They are happy and smiling and everything is great and "WHAM!" Parents do not like to do that and say, "I just cannot wait to hear my child scream in agony." We bring pain because it is necessary to avoid greater future pain and to bring ultimate joy.

God is a kind Father who allows and designs trials into our life as they are necessary. Many of them are necessary for us because God has a picture of who we are going to be and the joy we are going to receive. He knows what we do not know, just as the parent knows what their baby cannot understand at the time.

Then Peter opens Verse 7 with the words "so that". This verse reveals God deems some trials necessary so,

⁷ ...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.

These words point to God's specific purpose and design. Peter teaches us God governs all the distresses we experience and our pains are not ultimately the designs of Satan or of evil people, but are part of the design of a loving Father. This is not to say Satan and evil people are not involved in the cause of our hurts. That is not what the Bible teaches, for Satan and evil people certainly are a part of the cause of our pain, but the Devil and wicked people not the ultimate cause. They may be the immediate cause, but they are never the ultimate cause, for God is always the ultimate cause, who moves and works sovereignly, even through the wickedness of men to accomplish His joyful purpose in our lives.

That is a weighty truth and it takes time and effort in the study of Scripture to continue to bring that to us. It is such an important point and it is vital for us to grab onto this.

This principle stands as absolutely vital to our joy, yet is often misunderstood or missed altogether by believers. Peter knows that and that is why he begins this letter talking to suffering people with this teaching regarding God's sovereignty and purposes in the midst of our trials, in His loving kindness, and in His intent for joy.

Peter is going to continue this theme of God's sovereign design in trials later in his letter. Later we will read,

^{3:17} For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

^{4:19} ...therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Peter talks about this truth so much to these friends of his whom he loves and who are hurting so deeply because these truths carry such practical weight. He is not talking in a seminary classroom on the sovereignty of God. He is talking about real, live people going through real, live suffering, needing real, live truth to stabilize them, maintain them, and provide them with joy.

There are two illustrations in Scripture help us to understand this vital truth. The first is the story of Joseph and his sale into slavery by his brothers. That is the immediate cause. His brothers do not like him because he is the favorite son and Joseph knows this. He went Egypt. He was a slave in Potiphar's house. He got kicked out because he was a righteous man. He was thrown into a dungeon. Years and years of his life were spent in absolute misery, separated from his family and from the love of a father. You can imagine, if you did not have this perspective Peter brings, his life would not one of joy, but his life was one of joy, even while he was in prison.

When his brothers came for food, after Joseph was placed second in command in Egypt and was in charge of dispensing food, they ultimately were very concerned Joseph was going to take revenge upon them, especially after his father died. They came and talked to him about this and asked, "Are you going to strike us down now? Are you going to get your revenge?" Joseph's response, which is so wonderful in Genesis 50,

²⁰ "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

The ultimate cause always trumps the immediate cause. God always wins with his people. Was this a man who was vexed by the evil people and the brothers who did him wrong all of his life? Was this a man who had a chip on his shoulder? He comforted his brothers because they were feeling bad about their wickedness toward him which caused him so much pain. Who does that? I tell you, it is the Christian who receives the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

The second illustration is found in 2 Corinthians 12, which about Paul's thorn in the flesh. He calls that thorn a "messenger of Satan", but God had given it to him. The ultimate cause was God, but the immediate cause was Satan, but God had a plan to use it for His joy.

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

The second truth is: The Christian's trials become a cause for more joy. Trials do not rob us of joy, but rather they intensify joy. That is the truth of the believer's life. God's design in trials is not to rob some of the joy He has already given us, but to provide us with a multiplied joy, a joy which is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Verse 6, as we read it, does not mesh with our natural way of thinking. If I were writing Verse 6, I would say something like this to a suffering people: "In this you rejoice, you have been relieved of various trials and many grievous pains. Think 'it is bad now', but think of what it could be." That is my human wisdom and that is the best I have, left to myself. It is not very comforting, is it, to be told, as you are going through time, to be told, "It could be worse!" That is all we have when live a natural life, without God and His designs. But, God writes,

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials...

Peter tells us a number of things about Christian trials. First, he tells us they are momentary; they are only a little while. Christian's troubles never last. Peter emphasized the comparative shortness of our trials by using the words, "...for a little while..." The duration of the time of trial and suffering is always relative. If we were to compare our trial to the course of our physical life on earth, some trials are extremely long and not for a little while.

I think of Joni Eareckson Tada who, as a teenager, dove into Chesapeake Bay and broke her neck and was paralyzed from the neck down and has been paralyzed for the past forty-four years. Peter says, "In this you rejoice, but now for a little while." How can he say that is a little while? God does not compare our sufferings and trials to our physical lifetime, but to eternity.

God is the Eternal God. He has existed before time began, which is hard to imagine, and He will continue to exist into eternity future. God recognizes along that timeline He has in store for us, this trial is a little speck and momentary along that timeline. The psalmist understood this, when he said in Psalm 30,

⁵ Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

That is always true for the Christian! It may be a whole night, but friends there is joy in the morning and that morning will never, ever end.

Secondly, the Christian's trials are always productive. We read that in Verse 7,

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.

Our suffering is a suffering of profound purpose which is to provide for us a pure faith. Peter uses the great illustration of gold which had been the currency throughout human history and a valuable commodity. When gold is purified it is melted in fire. The dross or impurities rise to the top and are skimmed off so that, at the end of the day, the gold becomes more valuable, purer, and more precious. The intense heat does not damage or destroy the gold, but it destroys the impurities within the gold and that which is not valuable at all. Peter tells us this is what it is for the Christian life when God places fire underneath us.

God's fire never destroys that which is valuable and precious. The fire of affliction never destroys faith. Some people will say, "I went through this horrible struggle and it destroyed my faith. I do not know why God would do this, but if He does not treat me better then my faith is gone." I understand many people describe their life that way, but I would say, "If the fire of affliction destroys faith, it is not real faith, because real faith is valuable." If you do not have real faith which is valuable, you did not have faith in the first place. You have revealed there was no faith and there was nothing valuable which is lasting.

Real faith, when it comes under the intensity of the fire of affliction, becomes more valuable and more precious. As believers, we realize faith is so precious because it is with faith we have the eyes to see God and the more we see God that is where our joy is, because our joy is in Him and He is our treasure. A person reading this, who does not have faith and does not value faith, may say, "So what! I would rather have comfort than faith." They do not know their joy is found not in their comfort, but it is found in God and faith helps us to see God and grab hold of Him and enjoy Him. Peter says, "Listen, when you go through the fire of affliction, know God has a design for it and the design is to

purify a faith so that faith will become more precious, because it is through that faith you see more of God and enjoy more of Him, and your joy is made full.”

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.¹

I am humbled when I see God’s people embrace the fires God sends them.

This week I talked with Bob Christmas, a man in our church, who was recently at the Mao Clinic, and who is diagnosed with multiple myeloma. After stem cell transplants, he will undergo two days of chemotherapy where the doctors have told him they will take him down to as close to death as they possibly can. As Bob sat in my office, I asked Bob, “How can I pray for you?” He responded, “Just pray I can be faithful. Pray I would glorify God, whatever the outcome.” That is the Christian’s joy: to know there is something far more valuable than our comfort.

The second issue is: The Christian's trials result in honor and glory. We read,

⁷ ... that you may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

When Peter talks about “the revelation of Jesus”, he is talking about the Second Coming, a time when Jesus will establish His rule and reign upon this earth and will put away all rebellion, and put down sin and the present world forces which rise up in rejection of Him.

Presently, the world hates Jesus, denies His majesty, and persecutes those who worship Him. That is still true all throughout the world today, but that is not going to be the permanent state. There will be a day when Jesus comes and at that point, Peter says, you will be found in praise, honor, and glory. Peter is talking to a people whose faith does not result in praise, honor, and glory. They are not receiving any praise, honor, and glory in this world for their faith, but they are receiving mocking, scorn, imprisonment, persecution, and death. He pushes them beyond what they see right now, and a faith which sees in the horizontal, and into a future which grabs hold of the promises of God and he says, “When Jesus comes, and you have faith, you will be really glad you have faith because that is the only thing that matters. It will result in praise, honor, and glory.”

To whom will it result in praise, honor, and glory? First, it will be to the Lord Jesus, because we exist to glorify God. It will also result in praise, honor, and glory to us, because when we attach to Jesus we share in His glory. I believe the big aspect of sharing in His glory is having Jesus, the King of Glory, look at us and simply say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”² Do you want to hear that? How badly do you want to hear that as a believer? Do you want to hear that badly enough, when affliction comes, you will say, “I will rejoice because I know this is God’s design to help me hear that on that day and give me a joy which is inexpressible, filled with glory, and resulting in praise, honor, and glory. Praise God it is so!

A man, in the 3rd Century, two hundred years after Jesus died upon the cross, was anticipating death. He penned these last words to a friend: “It’s a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them.”³

How about you? Are you one of “them”? Joy begins with new birth. If you do not have Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you do not have joy. He is the only source. He offers Himself to you and He tells you He has come so you might have joy, that His joy might be in you, and your joy may be made full. That is His purpose. I call you, upon the basis of God’s Gospel, to trust in Jesus, turn from your sin, and find His joy.

¹ “How Firm a Foundation,” John Rippon, 1787

² Matthew 25:21

³ “Today in The Word”, June 1988, p. 18

But, believer, are you also embracing joy with the arms of faith? In order to enjoy the joy God has given to us we must fight and struggle for it. We fight with faith, holding onto the truth of our salvation, the truth about Jesus, and keeping Him ever in view. Are you ready to role up your sleeves and fight for joy? It is your birthright.