

For a Little While

1 Peter 1:6-7

Let me tell you about a conversation I have had many times over the years as a pastor. As I get talking privately to someone in the church, I find out that they are going through a really difficult struggle. Or maybe I find out about the specific details of a struggle I knew about. So I ask the question, I ask about the struggle. I ask about their experience of grief or sorrow.

Then, what I often hear is something to the effect of this, "Church has become a really lonely place." The explanation goes something like this. "I go to church and everyone seems to be happy. Everyone's life seems to be fine. Everyone but me." You see, people come to church where everyone is dressed up and smiling, and they think to themselves, "I am the only one who is suffering."

And so they hide. They keep quiet, in the lonely isolation of their own personal, individual suffering.

And they make it worse for themselves, for when someone asks, "How are you doing?", they answer, "Fine." Or maybe they try to say more, but the other person isn't listening. Sadly, no matter what you answer, some people will only hear "fine" anyway. You've all had those conversations, maybe even this morning. "How are you?" "Fine."

But sometimes you're not fine, are you? Sometimes life is miserable. Sometimes the trials of life are overwhelming. Sometimes your suffering seems unbearable. And guess what happens when other people find out you are suffering? They ignore you. They ignore you because they don't know what to say. Or they ignore you because they don't want to upset you.

When I came to my second pastorate, I was still a very young man. And, early on in the ministry, I remember visiting a family who had recently left the church. I knew why they left. Their teenage son had committed suicide about a year earlier, and the funeral had been at the church. Every time those parents stepped into the door of the church, they felt that pain.

But that's not really why they left. They left because no one who talk about it. No one would acknowledge that pain. They had to pretend that it didn't exist. And many people would simply not say anything to them, people would not talk to them at all. And as those grieving parents tried to explain that to me, I knew it was true. I had recently heard those very words spoken to me by friends of those parents, "I just don't know what to say. I don't want to upset them, so I don't usually say anything."

I suspect you know exactly what I mean. Perhaps you have been left to suffer, alone, in silence. It's as if we think that defines Christian maturity, pretending that suffering doesn't exist. But that's not at all what the Bible says about our response to suffering. In fact, we are called to weep with those who weep. So the next time you hesitate talking to someone whom you know is suffering because you don't want to upset them, go talk to them anyway. They are already upset. They are already suffering. And if what you ask causes them to weep, then weep with them. If what you say causes someone to cry in their sorrow, then cry with them.

And don't ever tell someone to be happy because you know that everything will all work out. Too many misguided people become harmful to you by saying, "Cheer up, I know it will all work out." Or, "Don't be discouraged. I know it will get better." Sometimes, it doesn't work out. Sometimes people die.

Sometimes people are harmed, injured, offended, and grieved. And easy answers just don't help. Platitudes just don't bring any comfort. And there is nothing worse than to go to church feeling all the trials of your life, only to listen to sermons which seem to imply that if you did certain things correctly, the way God wants, everything will turn out fine.

Do you remember what Jesus did when he came to the home of his good friend, Lazarus. Lazarus had died, and his sisters Mary and Martha were weeping. What does the Bible say Jesus did? It's the shortest verse in the Bible, so if you have trouble memorizing Scripture, here's a good place to start.

John 11:35 "Jesus wept."

Don't think that godliness means that you should pretend that the grief of those trials doesn't exist. Don't think that godliness or spiritual maturity means that you should be immune from that grief, or that you give the appearance that you are immune from grief. That you should bear it yourself, that you shouldn't expose or reveal any weakness or vulnerability in yourself. That is just as wrong and foolish as it could possibly be.

When God afflicts you with the distress of grief, you are grieved! When God afflicts you with the distress of various trials, you are distressed. And God would intend you to be distressed. God allows and ordains those circumstances that cause grief. That's the nature of this life. That's the nature of this age, and all too many Christians just don't get that. They've got to be strong. They've got to be in control. They can't admit weakness, and they can't tolerate any expression of their own weakness.

All of that denies,

I. THE REALITY OF VARIOUS TRIALS.

And that's what this text is all about. That's what this sermon

is all about. You have come here today to hear about the reality of various trials in your life.

But actually, you don't need me to hear about those troubles. You already know all about them. You have them. Everyone of you. Some, obviously, more than others. Some, obviously, more pronounced. More life threatening or life dominating. But all of you have some experience of various trials. I've only been here a month, and I already know what many of those trials are! I have had lengthy and substantive conversations with many of you now, and almost everyone one of them has had some reference to some trial or another. And many of you have come to know something of the trials I have been through.

Peter writes,

1 Peter 4:12 "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."

So don't be surprised. Don't be unsettled. Don't be shaken. Nothing strange is happening to you; but instead, something very, very ordinary. It is the reality of various trials. Look at how those trials are described in verse 6. "You have been grieved by various trials."

The Greek word is well translated "grieved." The NASB expresses it, "You have been distressed." It could be translated sorrowful, or thrown into sorrow. It's not so much the pain of the trial, but deeper, the grief. Not the suffering itself so much, but the mental effect of suffering. The deeply painful emotions of sorrow. The sadness of that sorrow.

So don't be surprised. This is nothing strange. Life in this world, in this age, means that there will be,

A. Grief and distress.

I've heard any number of people say, in the midst of grief, "I think I'm going crazy." That's what the unsettling distress of grief makes you feel. That's what the trauma of grief makes you feel. And what Peter is trying to say is that that strange feeling of going crazy is actual normal. The normal experience of grief is the experience of distress. That's what these words mean. That's the normal experience of Christian life in this age, as we live in a fallen world under God's curse.

It's a consequence of Adam's sin. We no longer live in the garden. Now, it's a jungle. We no longer labor without thorns to contend with. We no longer live without death to contend with. We no longer love without sin to contend with. "In this world, you will have trouble."

As Peter puts it, you will experience,

B. Various trials.

"Trials" is a good translation. Circumstances that put your life on trial. The idea isn't one of temptation, but adversity. Trouble. Deep trouble. It's the same word James uses in, James 1:2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials."

And again, also,

1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you."

Do you see those words being joined together. Not just a trial, but now a fiery trial. That's the reality of life. Now, I'm not going to end there, and leave you in the throngs of hopelessness. That's not my point. But I'm not going to skip over all this either.

Neither am I going to speak in pious platitudes about suffering, as if it's something you somehow ought to learn to enjoy. That's not the point. The point is that suffering is not enjoyable. It is not pleasant. I'm not going to cover it over with a barrage of flowery language that might make you feel less spiritual the more you feel the sorrow of grief.

And if I ask you how you are doing, I don't want you to simply say "fine" if you are not doing fine! This pain of suffering, this grief of various trials, is the reality of where we all live. And we need to be able freely admit that rather than run away or hide from that reality.

Let me tell you, I have known the grief and distress of various trials this week. Personally. I have known the grief and distress of various trials in an intensified way for the past two years. And while some of you know some of the details, that's not the point. The point is that we need to recognize this inescapable reality of life, the reality of various trials. That's point one. Now let me continue. Notice how Peter describes,

II. THE TIME FOR VARIOUS TRIALS.

Not just the reality of them, but how long they last. And here is where your encouragement is begun. Here is how the proper perspective on the various trials of life is established. Understand the timing.

One thing that grief does is mess with your sense of timing. Overwhelming grief can cause you to lose all sense of time, all sense of perspective. That's what overwhelming means. You are so consumed by it, you can't escape. Past, present and future are all merged into one very painful present. And there can seem no way out.

So what is Peter's perspective on time? How does he define the duration of these various trials?

v.6 "...now, for a little while."

A. For a little while.

He is not dismissing the seriousness of those trials. This is not a simplistic appeal to dismiss the seriousness of the trials, as if everything will be better in the morning. Rather, this is the perspective on life that looks to the future, that looks to eternity.

What Peter is doing is putting all of life into perspective. All of life, even if is 70 or 80 years, is really just "a little while."

So don't forget what we've read and studied thus far.

v.3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

When you think in those terms, in terms of your "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," then the whole of this lifetime, the whole of this age, is really just "a little while." When you think about your eternal inheritance, when you think about your salvation, ready to be revealed, then the experiences of this life become just "a little while."

Compared to eternity, the various trials of this life last just "a little while." And we know what eternity will be like, don't we? We know what heaven will be like, and among the different descriptions of heaven given in the Bible, we read this,

Rev. 21:4 "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;

there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

In the poetic language of the prophet Isaiah,

Is. 65:17 "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, And her people a joy. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, And joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, Nor the voice of crying."

That is at least part of the reason Paul is able to declare with such exultation,

Rom. 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

So the way to come to terms with the grief and sorrow of the distressing trials of this age is not to deny their existence. The answer is not a Stoic hardness of heart where no emotions are displayed. The answer is not in pretending that all is fine, when it isn't. The answer is to suffer, with hope for the future. Suffer, with endurance, knowing that by contrast with the experience of eternity, the suffering will last only "for a little while."

That little while may be your whole life, on earth. That little while may be longer than you think you are able to bear. But, beloved, it is only a little while. So we can weep together. You can admit and acknowledge that everything isn't fine. You can grieve with deep sorrow and not have to think that you are going crazy. You can have hope that you will survive, because God has appointed this age to last for just "a little while."

There is a second note of encouragement here as well, with

respect to the time for various trials. Notice the words,

B. If need be.

There is a limitation on the trials that God allows and ordains for us. There is a constraint. And this is important. They are not random. They are not meaningless. They are not arbitrary. Or fortuitous. They are not unplanned, accidental or indiscriminate. God is still in control. God is always in control.

And the various trials that you experience, the time you will be called upon to endure those trials is limited by that perfect purpose of God. You will only suffer “if need be.” Or, perhaps translated, “if necessary.”

I will be the first to tell you, and actually insist to you, that we don’t always know what that reason is. We often cannot understand the necessity, nor why God would ordain a particular trial “if need be.” I’m not flippant about that, nor am I simplistic; and I am certainly dismissing the painful reality of what those trials might be. But I am convinced from the Bible that no matter what level of understanding I might obtain, God’s purpose is nonetheless perfect. And God’s intention, God’s providence, if you will, only allows you to suffer according to the need or purpose which God himself defines.

Your suffering is not random or meaningless. Because God is not random or meaningless. Please don’t torture yourself by insisting that you always be able to define that purpose for yourself. But please don’t remain in the hopelessness of despair caused by thinking that what you are experiencing is somehow unrelated to God’s own eternal purpose. You will only suffer, if need be. You will only suffer if God, in his good providence, determines that it is necessary.

And you will only suffer for a little while, when you compare

the span of this life to the span of eternity.

But then, why? What can we say about God’s purpose? Thankfully, despite what I have just said about not knowing God’s purpose, there are somethings he reveals to us. There are two things mentioned here in our text that give us something of a definition of,

III. THE PURPOSE FOR VARIOUS TRIALS.

v.7

The first word in Greek is translated more fully, “in order that.” Or, “for the purpose of...” So we have something of a defined purpose, and that is significantly helpful. I expect that you are familiar with this first thing mentioned with regard to purpose, and I want to bring that emphasis before this morning.

This really is true. I promise you, that I will never speak these words carelessly or flippantly. I pledge to you my commitment as I preach to you, not to use these words in a way that is intended to tell you to stop talking about the trials of your life. These words are not intended to deny the reality of various trials, nor to tell you that you cannot grieve.

Rather, in the context of that grief, as you weep with those who weep, as you suffer yourself, even painful trials of great sorrow, please be sure to know that God is seeking,

A. To purify your faith.

Your faith is compared to gold. Quite a glorious comparison, isn’t it? Your faith is compared to gold, as rich and valuable as any substance on earth. But even gold has to be purified. Even gold has to be cleansed of its impurities. And I expect you understand how that happens? It is melted.

Gold is purified by being melted, because as it is melted everything that is not gold is burned up. The dross. Burned up and removed by fire.

Now let me put these words into perspective. A few days ago it got really hot. High 80s. It might have even hit 90°. That's hot. 100° is almost unbearable. By 140° or 150°, the heat becomes life threatening. At 212°, water begins to boil. But gold? Gold will continue to melt, without boiling into a gas, until it reaches the temperature of 5,173°. That's Peter's reference point! 5,173° That's hot!

Your faith is put into the oven of life, the trials of life, and the temperature might be set up to 5,173°. God will purify your faith through fiery trials, because your faith is more valuable than gold.

And there is a second purpose. Peter is not cold hearted and dispassionate. Rather, he is so very encouraging, because as you look forward to the glory of eternity, as you consider the very short time of your earthly afflictions in comparison to eternity, look at what he promises you in the day of eternity. This is God's purpose for those various trials that are so grievous, that your faith...

v.7 "...may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

When Jesus returns, at the end of the age, when you appear before God in the presence of Jesus, then however much your faith has been purified, you will obtain "praise, honor and glory." That's the purpose which God declares as the reason for the various trials of your life,

B. To gain honor.

That you will gain honor. That you will gain praise. That you

will gain glory. When Jesus Christ is revealed.

It is not wrong to speak in those terms. It is not that you earn something by your own merit. There is no self-righteousness nor any legalistic law-keeping in view here. But simply the encouragement to the one whose faith has been purified. Praise, honor and glory shall be yours.

Paul even expresses this idea with reference to himself, as an encouragement to us,

2 Tim. 4:6 "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

So as you endure painful trials, as you grieve even with great sorrow, let these words be your encouragement. As you suffer as gold in fire, there is a crown of righteousness being laid up for you, you who love his appearing and long for his return. A crown of righteousness awaits the one whose faith has been purified in that fire.

That's why Peter can say at the very beginning of verse 6, rejoice!

Next week we will focus upon that joy, but for now, even if everything in life isn't fine, you can still rejoice as you suffer grief. Rejoice in the hope and the expectation that when Jesus returns in glory, this little while of suffering will be completely over. And that inheritance which is reserved in heaven for you shall become fully yours, you "who are kept by the power of God through faith for [that] salvation."

In this sure and certain hope, “you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials.”