



REJOICE – YOUR FAITH IS BEING REFINED

1 Peter 1:6-9

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Introduction - Images of Ezra

Ever since my son, Ezra, was born, I kept a journal of experiences with him that illustrates timeless theological truths. I entitled these journal entries: “Images of Ezra.”

One of the first entries is: “Ezra and the automatic kiss reflex.” As a new dad, you quickly realize that you’ve got to find some way to express the teeming affection and sheer wonder you feel at the birth of your child. You can’t of course simply drop the child, lift up your hands, and shout! This was for me a picture of God the Father’s unbridled affection for his Son.

Or there’s the entry entitled: ‘Ezra and the steep stairs’. You’ll be aware that while the US is a big country, England, by comparison, is a rather small place. The houses are small, and in order to make stairs to a second floor fit, they’ve got to be really, really narrow and really, really steep. He would encourage himself at the top of the stairs: “Ezra, be careful; Ezra, be careful,” as he would in fact carefully navigate his way down these very steep stairs. This was for me a picture of how God uses the warnings of Scripture to keep us from stumbling.

Another is: ‘Ezra and his Father’s Praise’. One thing you will appreciate perhaps more clearly as a parent is that children love to be praised. This came home to me one afternoon in Cambridge, when Ezra and I were in the park playing. Ezra running said, ‘Daddy, when I run really fast, you go like this’—and stuck his two thumbs up in the air. He was scripting my response of praise! ‘Daddy, here’s how you should praise me!’ You see, children love to be praised. And, you want to know something: we as parents don’t begrudge giving them praise. How odd indeed if I were to have responded to Ezra: ‘O, come on, don’t be so full of yourself!’ I had quite the opposite response; truth be told, I rather enjoy praising my children—and they enjoy receiving it.

This was for me a picture of how the children of God love the praise of their Father. But it was also a picture of how God the Father loves to praise his children. He doesn’t begrudge it; instead, he delights in it.

Two Kinds of Praise

You see, the astonishing thing about biblical praise is that it flows in *two* directions. There is, of course, praise *for* God. This is the praise we’re very familiar with. This is the praise, or the worship, we give to God. Scripture everywhere talks about this kind of praise, not least in the psalms.

Psalm 103:1: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!’

Psalm 135:3: ‘Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing to his name, for it is pleasant!’

But there is also praise *from* God. This is the praise the Father lavishes on his children. Did you know there was such a thing?

Romans 2:28-29: “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. *His praise is not from men, but from God.*”

1 Corinthians 4:5: “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. *At that time each will receive his praise from God.*” (NIV).

John 5:41-44: “I do not accept *praise from men*, ⁴² but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. ... ⁴⁴ How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain *the praise that comes from the only God?*” (NIV).

So, there is praise for God *and* praise from God. There is our adoration of who God is, and there is God’s commendation of who we have become in his Son. There are two kinds of praise.

Sunday Joy Meets Monday Morning Grief

You will notice that our passage has both kinds of praise. It begins with praise for God. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” (v. 3). But it moves toward praise from God: “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (v. 7).

As we saw last week, we ought to bless God because we have been born again. The reality of the new birth, with all that it means and entails for us, ought to cause our hearts to sing and our souls to rejoice. We’ve been born again to a “living hope,” and now fix our eyes upon our guaranteed inheritance, which is imperishable and undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us, who are ourselves being guarded by God for this ready salvation. We therefore have every reason, and more, to rejoice!

“In this you rejoice,” then, as Peter says at the beginning of verse 6. Yet rejoicing in the prospect of our ready salvation is not the whole story, is it? At least, it’s not the whole story in my life, and I suspect it’s not the whole story in your life either. Peter himself recognizes this; he’s no naïve optimist. No, as he goes on to remind us in this same verse, indeed the very next breath, there is another experience that goes hand-in-hand with the experience of gladness: and that’s the experience of *grief*. “In this you rejoice,” our text says, “though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been *grieved* by various trials” (v. 6).

I like to think of this passage as moving from Sunday morning’s joy (vv. 3-5) to Monday morning’s grief (v. 6). We have been born again to a living hope through the reality of Easter resurrection! And now our eyes are fixed on the future—eagerly awaiting the curtain to fall and our salvation to be revealed, basking in the sunshine of the resurrection—our hearts elevated and full of joy. But then the sun sets on Sunday morning’s joy. And we go home, and go to bed, and close our eyes, and sleep . . . only to wake-up on Monday morning confronted—indeed, *grieved*—by what Peter calls “various trials.”

We all have trials; behind the veneer of pleasantness there are trials in all of our lives. Though they differ in their nature, and intensity and duration, we all have trials. What are the trials in your life right now? What are the trials that await you when you leave here? Trials at home: relational strains or wayward children; trials at work: an challenging boss or difficult colleagues; trials in your head: anxiety, loneliness, or lust. What is your trial? We are all *grieved* by various trials.

Yet, before we allow Monday morning grief to drown out Sunday morning joy, we need to read past the end of verse 6 and into verse 7. For there we learn that there is a purpose to all of our Monday morning grief; there is a divine design behind all your distresses.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, *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 (vv. 6-7).

A profoundly unchristian thinker once said a profoundly Christian thing. The profoundly unchristian thinker was Friedrich Nietzsche. Yet the profoundly Christian thing he said was this: “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*.” It’s the lack of a ‘why’, of a purpose, that makes trials feel so senseless as to be unbearable. But if I could be confident of a ‘why’ to my trials—some purpose, some reason, some design to the challenges of life—I believe, God helping me, I could endure almost anything.

Trials Bring About Tested Genuineness

But what, according to this passage of Scripture, is the why or the design behind our various trials? As we see in verse 7, part of the why is to bring about something Peter considers more precious than gold itself. And that is what he calls “the tested genuineness of your faith.”

The trials you and I go through are like fire that refines our faith. And as fire, trials, first, remove what is false from our faith. Our faith is of course mixed with all sorts of impurities and imperfections. Trials burn those off of faith. But trials also strengthen what is real about our faith. And it is this lifelong and painful process of removing the false and strengthening the real of our faith that God uses to bring about what Peter calls “the tested genuineness of faith” (v. 7).

This is how trials work: they prove to you, and to others, who you are. Are you real, or are you not? Is your faith genuine, or is it not? No one really knows, not even you yourself, until your faith’s been put on trial. Until it’s been tested, you cannot know its genuineness. If God grieves me by taking something I treasure, will I still be glad in him? If he slays me, will I yet hope in him? Or will I despise him? Will I resent him because of his bitter providence? This is what trials reveal to us.

One of the most mature Christians I know once described what happened to him when he found out that his mother had just been killed in a car accident. He was in his early thirties at the time, and it was his father who called to deliver the crushing news. Stunned, he hung up the phone, told his wife what had happened then went to his bedroom. When he had shut the door behind him, he threw himself down at the side of the bed, buried his head in his arms, and wept bitterly.

Yet, as he recalls the experience, something remarkable happened to him; or you might say something remarkable happened *in* him. As he wept because of profound grief, he nevertheless found a *profounder joy* welling up in his heart. So much so that he nearly laughed as he continued to weep. For what he realized at just that moment was that he didn’t hate God for taking his mother; instead, he still trusted him and indeed loved him. Furthermore, as he wept over his loss while he rejoiced in his God, he found himself saying to himself about himself: “*I’m real, I’m real, I’m real.*”

You see, this is one of the purposes of suffering. This is one of the reasons why difficulties come into our lives. This explains why we face afflictions. Suffering and difficulties and afflictions come into our lives to *refine our faith* and thus *to reveal its genuineness*. Suffering causes you to grieve and to weep; yet the reality of true faith causes you to rejoice in the midst of your suffering. And because of this, the suffering itself brings about “the tested genuineness of faith.”

So don't be surprised when God allows suffering in your life. So often we're shocked when life doesn't go as we had planned, or when the hand of Providence brings hardship into our path. Yet remember what Peter says a little later on in this same letter: “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” (4:12). Suffering is not something strange, but something to be expected.

Nor should we begrudge the suffering God sends us. It is not there by accident; it is there by design—God's design. He has sent suffering into your life to try and test you, that is, to give you the most precious of gifts: a purified faith, a strengthened faith, a refined faith. It is there to prove and indeed improve your faith. As Spurgeon has rightly said, “Faith without trial is like a diamond uncut, the brilliance of which has never been seen.”¹ But God wants the brilliance—the tested genuineness—of your faith to be seen.

This is why James says what he says in the opening verses of his epistle, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (1:2-3). And this is why we sing what we sing in that great hymn, “How Firm A Foundation”:

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

Refined Faith Receives Divine Praise

So, you see, then, part of the why behind the various trials that grieve us is that they bring about something very precious indeed: they bring about the tested genuineness of faith.

But what makes the tested genuineness of faith so precious is this: it receives divine praise. This is what Peter means when he says that the tested genuineness of faith “may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (v. 7b). And here we see the second kind of praise: praise from God.

Whose praise and glory and honor? *Yours*. When? At the revelation of Jesus Christ, when he summons every persons to give an account of his or her life. What's he going to be looking for on that day, that great and final day of reckoning? He's going to be looking for *one* thing: what Peter calls “the tested genuineness of faith”—the *faith-filled* faithfulness that comes as a result of God sending us through the fiery furnace of affliction.

Just imagine the scene. There you stand in a line that stretches out in both directions as far as the eye can see; the sheer throng of humanity takes your breath away. And there, on a throne before you, sits the Lord Jesus Christ himself, in all of his crucified and risen glory; his

¹ Spurgeon, p. 436.

eyes moving slowly, but steadily down the line till they rest on you. The intensity of his gaze stuns you, and you stand there bewildered, covered from head to toe in ashes and burn marks from all the fiery trails you've had to endure, not least, death itself. And all you know to do in that moment is to lift up before your King and Judge the only thing you've got: the tested genuineness of faith.

His eyes fall upon your offering. And you see a smile begin to form on his face. Then his mouth opens, and out comes praise and glory and honor as he lavishes you with divine approval: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master!"

We need to understand, then, that God grieves us now so that he can glorify us later. He sends us through the fiery furnace of affliction in this life, so that he can welcome us with divine praise in the next. And it is the prospect of Jesus smiling upon our faith, upon what he has birthed and sustained in us, that ought to sweeten all our suffering in this life.

Conclusion – "But You Have Not Come Home Yet"

The story is told of a faithful missionary who was returning home by boat from Africa to the United States. Travelling on this same ship was the American President. Naturally, when the ship arrived in port the President received an impressive welcome: much fanfare and much attention. However, the missionary received none. Feeling dejected by this, the missionary complained to God that after a few days in Africa the President can receive such a warm welcome when he returns home, while after years of sacrificial service and suffering, the missionary himself can return home and receive no welcome at all. Then, he sensed God saying to him: "But you have not come home yet."²

Friends, you have not come home yet. You're still en route. But let me assure you of this one thing: when you arrive home, you will receive an impressive welcome indeed. For on that Day, God's faithful servants, those whose lives have been redeemed by the shed blood of Jesus Christ and whose faith has been refined in the fiery furnace of affliction, receive praise and glory and honor from God himself.

Yet, in the meantime, our call is to live upon and love the invisible Christ, who one day will be revealed to us. As Peter reminds us: "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, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:8-9).

Amen.

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² This story is told by Ajith Fernando, in his *The Call to Joy & Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), p. 75.