

Joy in Grief

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me say good morning to you all. I love the Easter season, love the sound of bells. I was reading not too long ago, I saw an article in the New York Times by a philosophy professor at Notre Dame, and there's been a lot of research on happiness and what are the factors that determine whether or not we live happy lives.

And this particular person has reduced it to four crucial circumstances that will allow you to have a happy life. Number one, you need to be sufficiently free from suffering.

I mean, that's pretty intuitive. Number two, meaningful work. Number three, the proper use of pleasure. And number four, loving relationships.

So if you have these factors, then you're going to live a reasonably happy life. And it's really helpful to know that as long as you have access to those four factors.

What if you don't have access to those things? This morning, we're looking in the lectionary at the New Testament reading, 1 Peter 1, verses 3 through 9. And if you know anything about this letter, Peter is writing to Christians who are dispersed throughout the known world.

[1 : 15] And because of their faith, most of them are facing pretty severe persecution. Some in the form of imprisonment or even death. But many in the form of marginalization, social exclusion, socioeconomic marginalization and disadvantage.

And so we can say, I think with a reasonable degree of confidence, their lives were definitely not sufficiently free of suffering. They faced the reality of suffering on a daily basis.

And yet, in verse 8, he describes these Christians as rejoicing with inexpressible joy. Christians are able to rejoice, to experience joy, even in the midst of suffering and trials.

In other words, it says here that Christians are able to rejoice while grieving. That we are able to have joy in the midst of grief. So the question we want to ask this morning is, how?

How is such a thing possible? What we'll begin to see is this, is that while happiness is rooted in your circumstances, joy, the kind of joy that enables you to rejoice even in grief, is rooted in faith.

[2 : 31] And where you put your faith. And this passage shows us three ways that Christian faith produces joy, even in the midst of grief and trial.

Let's pray. Lord, we ask that as we open your word, that the hope of the resurrection would shine through this text. That you're not a fabricated God described in a dead word.

That you're a risen God who speaks through a living word. We pray that you would speak to us this morning that as we open this written word, we would actually come to face with the living word, Jesus Christ.

He is the one we've come to see this morning. We pray that in our encounter with him, we would receive what we need, each one of us. And that as this happens, you would be glorified as your promises are fulfilled.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So the first way that faith produces joy is this. Faith points us beyond trials in our lives.

[3 : 39] It points beyond trials. Verse 6 says, In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.

Now what is a trial? A trial is a specific kind of suffering. This isn't just suffering writ large. A trial is a situation in which being faithful to Jesus is what is causing you to suffer.

It's because you've chosen to follow Jesus and therefore you have invited suffering into your life.

And so the word that Peter uses here, test, right, a test of faith, it means a test that discerns the true nature of something.

So imagine a pirate with a gold coin who like bites into the coin to see if it's real, right? Only what Peter's talking about is as we suffer, our faith is like that coin.

It's being tested to see if it's real and genuine. So what are some examples of trials we might face? Well, I think probably most of us believe that if we're not married, we should trust that God will eventually bring someone into our lives.

[4 : 55] Or if you are married, you trust that God brought that person into your life. But then maybe you face a situation if you're single where somebody comes along and they are handsome or beautiful, they're intelligent, they have a great job, they're successful, they're very interested in you, you're very attracted to them, it's going really well, and it's been a long time since there was anybody like this that you really could see a future with, except for the fact that they are totally opposed to the fact that you're a Christian.

And you've got to decide in that moment, do I really trust that God's going to bring somebody into my life or am I going to take advantage of this opportunity that's right in front of me?

Or if you're married and it's been 15, 20 years and you've had a couple of kids and you're struggling and you feel like you have nothing in common and you're looking at this person across the table feeling like, did I make a huge mistake?

And you've got a marriage counselor and friends who are saying, you know, you should probably walk out. Your happiness is what matters most in this situation. And you're saying, do I really trust that God brought this person into my life or am I going to take advantage of the situation that I'm being presented with?

Maybe you believe theoretically that we should only care about what God thinks, that we shouldn't let other people's opinions dissuade us. But then we go through our daily lives and we're in situations constantly where we find ourselves self-censoring.

[6 : 22] Because we know that if we say or represent certain viewpoints, it's not going to go well for us. Do we really believe that? Or maybe we say, you know, I believe in forgiveness and I know the Bible talks a lot about forgiveness and Jesus calls us to forgive.

But then somebody really hurts you and they really wrong you. And guess what? They are not sorry. They are not repentant. In fact, they're blaming you. And then Jesus says, well, we should forgive as we've been forgiven.

And you say, well, I'm not sure that applies in this situation. These are all trials that we face and they bring an enormous amount of suffering into our lives. And the default perspective focuses on the trials themselves.

Right? The risk. The risk. The risk of giving up that relationship. The risk of staying in the marriage. The risk of speaking up. The trial focuses on the potential cost of doing that.

And so the result is that these trials seem insurmountable. I can't imagine myself doing that. But what faith does is it changes, it reorients our perspective to where we're no longer simply focusing on the trial.

[7 : 33] We're able to see through the trial to what's beyond the trial. And it does this in two ways. The first thing that it does is it lets us see beyond our trials to future glory.

That's what Peter is talking about here. Peter says that trials happen, quote, for a little while. Now, you imagine what some of these people were facing in the first century. For a little while.

How dare you belittle my suffering, Peter? But what he's saying is we need to understand that all of the trials in our life, everything that's happening now, relatively speaking, is merely happening for a little while when compared to eternity.

Now, all of this depends on your perspective, right? Suffering and trials, if you just compare them to other people's lives, you take your suffering and trials and you compare your life to other people's lives, it may mean that your suffering seems interminable.

But what happens when you take your life and you compare it to the weight of eternity? Right? That begins to change things. What do you believe about eternity in comparison to this temporal life?

[8 : 43] Life. Imagine two people go and they each get the same job. Social experiment. And each person is told the same thing. You're going to work in a hot, windowless, un-air-conditioned, small office.

You're going to have no weekends off. You're going to have no vacation. It may actually sound like some of your jobs. And you're going to do this for a year. And both people are told that.

Hot, windowless office, no weekends, no vacations. You're going to do it for a year. And it's menial work. It's menial work. There's only one difference. One person is told at the end of this, guess what?

You're going to make \$20,000. The other person is told at the end of this, you're going to make \$20 million. Right? Big difference.

Right? That first person is going to be grumbling and complaining and blah, blah. The second person is just going to be happy as a clam. I'll do whatever you want me to do. \$20 million. Your perspective about eternity really radically shapes your experience of the present.

[9 : 51] The other thing faith does is it lets us see beyond our trials to the hand of God behind them. Peter says that trials happen, quote, for a little while if necessary. Well, who decides whether or not the trials in your life are necessary?

God. God. God does. So here's a hard truth to swallow. We focused on this last week a bit on Good Friday.

As well as the Easter vigil for those of you who are there. Whatever trials and suffering you're facing now, they're in your life because you need them. Because there's something that God is doing in your life that can only be accomplished through that trial.

There are some qualities, some virtues, maybe some of the qualities or virtues or aspects of character that we most desire for ourselves that can only be found on the far side of suffering. And that is a mystery. And I don't pretend to understand how or why it works that way. But we all can think of examples of people who have been through tremendous hardship. And they have become, in a way, beautiful as a result.

[11 : 04] This truth leads to the second way that faith produces joy. It doesn't just point beyond our trials. Faith is actually strengthened by trials. So what is the result of faithfully enduring trials, according to Peter, in verse 7?

He says that a faith that endures trials and hardship becomes a faith that is tested and genuine. In other words, this is a faith that is durable enough, it's strong enough, it's resilient enough to withstand anything.

This is the kind of faith that Peter says is more valuable and eternal even than gold, which one day will be dust. The gold that you treasure and hoard is going to be dust, but your faith is going to last into eternity.

Now, how do we get this kind of faith? And what we need to understand is that faith is very much like a muscle. I thought faith was a gift.

Well, it is. God gave you muscles, didn't He? He gave you, but He wants you to use them. He gave you faith, but He wants you to use it, right, in order to go stronger.

[12 : 15] And in order to go stronger, muscle and faith have something in common. They have to be met with resistance if they're to grow. I had a friend in college who could bench three times his body weight.

Three times his body weight. Now, some of you are like, well, I'd do that on a Tuesday, right? But for me, I looked at that and I thought, that's impossible. I saw him do it. He could bench three times his body weight.

This guy was not a lightweight guy either. And how does a person like that get to be that strong? Well, normal person, no superpowers. Over time, he simply increased his resistance as he was lifting, and his muscles grew stronger.

When you lift weights, or so I've been told, the goal is literally to put more resistance on your muscles than they can withstand.

And what you do is you break down the muscle fibers, and then as the muscles recover, they develop an increased capacity to bear more weight. So it's this process of resistance, breaking down, and then rebuilding those muscles, and they get stronger over time.

[13 : 23] And listen, faith is exactly the same. Trials, by design, trials are the resistance. They put you in a situation where following Jesus means dealing with resistance or challenge, which at times can feel like it is more than our faith can bear.

People get this idea that God never gives us more than we can handle. That's not in the Bible. Maybe that's power of positive thinking or something, but that's not in the Bible. The only way you can grow is for God to give you more than you can handle.

It's the only way you're going to grow. Because what happens is it begins to break down parts of your faith, like muscle fibers. And what does that do? It drives you back to the core of what you believe.

It drives you to the very foundation of your faith. Verse 6, Peter says, In this you rejoice. He's suffering people, all kinds of trials, but they're rejoicing in this.

What is the this he's talking about? Well, he's referring back to the first five verses of the chapter where he lays out the gospel. That's the foundation. That's the core of Christian faith.

[14:32] In other words, here's how it works. When trials overwhelm our faith, that drives us back to the heart of the gospel, what we really believe. And as we are driven back into the heart of the gospel, our understanding and reliance on it becomes stronger.

You know, there's a lot of talk today about deconstruction and Christians deconstructing their faith and how bad and unfortunate that is. But listen, there are different kinds of deconstruction.

And there's a kind of deconstruction that is necessary for our faith to grow. When trials overwhelm our faith, it often means that our view of God is too small, that it's inadequate.

And what happens is that small, inadequate view of God has to be deconstructed before our faith can grow. We have to go back to the foundation of our faith.

We have to be willing to question some of our fundamental assumptions because they may be wrong. And the foundation of our faith within the gospel is the historic event of the resurrection.

[15:47] Christian faith is not wishful thinking. That's what Peter's talking about in verse 3 when he says that we've been born again to a living hope. This is not positive thinking. This is not wish fulfillment.

He's saying Christians have a living hope because our faith is rooted in an historic event where somebody rose from death and came out of the tomb.

So why do we believe in all of the other things we believe? Why do we take Jesus' word seriously?

Or when Jesus seems to believe that all of Scripture is God's word and He quotes it as though it is coming directly from God and treats the Old Testament with the authority of divine inspiration.

And then we see all of the other theological principles and concepts that arise out of that Jesus' doctrine of Scripture, which, by the way, is higher than probably any of our doctrine of Scripture.

And we begin to realize that all of the foundation of Christianity is sort of based on this. Well, why do we believe in Scripture? We don't believe in the resurrection because of Scripture. We believe in Scripture because of the resurrection.

[16:55] That's the foundation of our faith. So we go back to the foundation. Why do I believe any of this? The muscle fibers are broken down and then they begin to rebuild.

That's the kind of deconstruction that needs to happen if our faith is ever going to grow. I know people who, because of their faith, give away 90% of their income to the poor. No kidding.

I know people who, because of their faith, have chosen a life of singleness and celibacy. I know people who, because of their faith, forgave people who murdered their family members.

And in every case, I feel like I did when I look at my college friend benching 450 pounds. I feel like I'm looking at something that's impossible.

I could never do that. But these are normal, everyday people whose faith has been strengthened over time by being faithful to Jesus in the everyday trials of life. Let's apply this before we move on.

[17:59] Do you want more faith? Are you praying to God to increase your faith? Find a situation in your life, in your work or in a relationship or your spending habits, how you spend your free time.

Find a situation where you are compromising your faith because you can't imagine what faithfulness would cost you. And then commit yourself to following Jesus in that area of your life no matter what, no matter how difficult it might seem.

That is God's weight bench for your faith. That is God's weight bench for your faith. So where are we so far?

We've seen a couple of things here. Faith produces joy even in the midst of grief. How? Well, two things. It points us beyond our trials to see eternity and to see the hand of God behind our trials.

And it is strengthened by our trials. So when we face trials, we can always say, well, my faith is growing through this. That's a reason to rejoice.

[19:03] But then the question remains, what's it all for? What's it all for? Verse 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.

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. Glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The third reason that faith produces joy is this. Faith brings glory through trials. It brings glory through trials. Through our trials, our faith becomes tested.

It becomes genuine. And then genuine faith, Peter says, means believing in and loving Jesus even though we've never seen Him. And then it says that when we do see Him, this will mean the culmination of God's saving work in us.

And verse 9 says, we will obtain the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. Now, we need to be careful here because it seems to be saying that we're just going to get saved. But we need to understand that even though it's translated salvation of our souls, the phrase here is better translated entire self.

[20 : 26] Right? Right? The salvation or the renewal or the restoration of your entire self. In other words, by faith we will obtain the total renewal of our whole self.

Let me put it a different way. God uses the trials in our lives to glorify us, which in this context means to make us more real.

To make us more human. To make us more fully human. The trials and the suffering in your life, God can use them to make you more fully human.

You know, as I think about trials and struggle, I think about one of my favorite illustrations of this from the Velveteen Rabbit. But I first heard it years ago from Tim Keller, who even now is facing his own trials in his battle with cancer.

So I couldn't help but use it with a bit of an homage to him in the process. He quotes from the Velveteen Rabbit, and this is about a toy rabbit's quest to become real.

[21 : 36] And here he's talking to the skin horse, the oldest toy in the nursery. So it's the Velveteen Rabbit who wants to be real, and he's talking to the oldest toy in the nursery. And here's what he says.

What is real? Asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came to tidy the room. Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?

Real isn't how you're made, said the skin horse. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real.

Does it hurt? Asked the rabbit. Sometimes, said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. When you are real, you don't mind being hurt.

Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, he asked, or bit by bit? It doesn't happen all at once, said the skin horse. You become. It takes a long time.

[22 : 46] That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints, and very shabby.

But these things don't matter at all. Because once you're real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. So this shows us how it would be possible to rejoice even in the midst of grief.

Because suffering and trials over time are going to do one of two things to you. If you suffer enough for long enough, as I know some of us have, it can rob you of all joy.

It can cause your heart to grow hard. It can make you deeply cynical. It can make you distrustful of others. It can make you angry or full of despair. Or, instead of robbing you of joy, it can actually enhance your joy.

It can deepen your faith. It can soften your heart. It can make you more thankful for the good things in your life. It can make you more compassionate toward those who are different or who are struggling in their own lives.

[24 : 17] It can make you more open. It can make you more loving. It can make you more really and truly human. The difference lies in where we put our faith. There are many religions and philosophies that offer ways to cope with suffering.

But as far as I know, the gospel is the only one that says that suffering is inseparably connected to joy and glory. Only the gospel says, on the one hand, your suffering and trials are grievous.

You should grieve. They are evil. And yet, on the other hand, God redeems them and repurposes them for our glory and for His glory.

And you say, well, how can we ever understand or believe that something like that is possible? And, of course, the greatest example of this is the cross.

The worst suffering, the worst trial ever endured, the greatest act of evil ever committed, Jesus was there, the greatest act of evil ever made in the world. But also, this was the means by which Jesus was glorified.

[25 : 32] This is how Jesus became who He was meant to be, which is the Savior of the world. And God promises that what happened through Jesus' suffering on the cross can also be true for us.

That though we may suffer, and though we may suffer because we follow Him, that that is the path to glory. In other words, that is the path to becoming real.

Becoming the men and women that we were always meant to be in Christ. And what Peter tells us is that if we put our faith in that, then no matter what trials we might face, that faith is going to point us beyond those trials.

That faith is going to be strengthened by those trials. And that faith is going to bring God's glory into our lives through those trials. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Chiefly, we thank You for Your resurrection. We pray that now and through this season and through our lives, that that would be the cornerstone of our faith.

[26 : 40] I pray that for those whose faith is being broken down now, that Lord, Your sovereign hand would guide that process. Guide us back to what is firm and sure.

I pray that for those of us who are facing trials or struggling or feel overwhelmed, I pray that these would be true words that not only sink into our minds but penetrate our hearts.

And I pray that as we come around Your table, we would take great comfort in knowing that You're a God who not only comforts us in our suffering, but You are willing to suffer and to give Yourself that one day it might all end and we might see You face to face.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.