

January 10, 2016

## Sojourners Tested by Fire

### 1 Peter 1:3-9

This is a letter written by the apostle Peter, to comfort and encourage and reassure believers in the first century who were experiencing pressure and persecution and suffering for their faith. It's a letter written to hurting people. They're going through some things. There were physical and psychological pressures. They were being marginalized and excluded in society. They were dealing with the temptations and seductions of life in a culture that did not value Christ. They were swimming against the prevailing tide of pagan world views; and there were doubts about the reliability of the promises of God and uncertainties about the future. These people had come to faith as the gospel had spread throughout the region of Asia Minor. They had embraced the Good News of Jesus. But now they were experiencing trouble. And to a large degree, that trouble was coming precisely because they had come to faith in Christ, but they were also experiencing the suffering and hardship that is common to being a human being in this world.

So Peter writes to them to give them perspective on this life of faith. Perhaps they had thought that their troubles were behind them when they believed in Jesus; and Peter is writing to say, 'No, this is normal. Don't be surprised.' As we saw last week, Peter wants these guys to know that suffering and trials, far from being accidental or abnormal are to be expected. Expect trouble and difficulty, but expect it under the hand of the God of all grace who has called you to His eternal glory. And Peter writes to remind them of their place in the world. 'You are chosen exiles', strangers in a strange land. This world is not your ultimate home. Don't live like it is. God knew you and chose you, before the foundation of the world. And it is God Himself who is your hope and provision in this life.'

And the thing that Peter does for believers who are hurting and suffering and confused somewhat by what is going on in their lives is point them to eternity. He's giving them some eternal perspective on life. Yes, life is hard, we're confronted by trouble and trials and difficult things; but it's a temporary thing. You've got to see this from eternity's view. [Rope illustration] If we don't see the eternal perspective, we'll get so focused on the here and now and it will wreck us. The now we have is so short, so temporary, in view of forever. As Christians we need to be primarily heavenly minded. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: *If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.*<sup>1</sup>

So here in this section this morning he shows them three things: what has happened, what will happen, and what is happening. What has happened; what will happen; and what is happening. First of all he takes them to **what has happened**. *3 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.* God caused us to be born again. He did it. According to His great mercy, He did it. Everything is predicated on God's great mercy. The fact that you're here this morning means that God has had great mercy on you. Every person living and breathing this morning is a sinner in hostile rebellion to the authority of our Creator and we don't deserve life, we deserve to die. We don't deserve to wake up in the morning. But we have, and that is His mercy. Mercy is not giving the other person what he deserves. Like the guy who had his portrait painted by a famous artist and when he saw the final product he lost it. "This is terrible! This painting is awful. It doesn't do me justice!" 'Sir', the artist responded, 'With a face like yours, you don't need justice, you need mercy!'

God had mercy on us. You see, Ephesians 2 says that you and I, *'...were dead in your trespasses and sin.'* I would ask you, 'How does a dead man get born again?' The answer, obviously is, he doesn't – unless there is some supernatural agency outside of himself that breathes life into those dead bones.

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*,

And that is God the Father. I don't think that many of us really believe that it was God and not ourselves that did the decisive work. We tend to think in terms of dates and when we walked down the aisle and signed the card. But I'll tell you, you wouldn't have walked down the aisle or signed the card had God not caused you to be born again! Our choosing God is important and significant – but nowhere as important and significant as His choosing us and causing us to be born again. We were dead! Dead men don't choose anything! But in His mercy, God caused us. If we saw this, we would break out in spontaneous praise to God like Peter did here - *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Isn't this your experience when you came to Christ? 'I am alive to God. I should be dead but I am alive! I am known by God and I was chosen by God and I have a living hope and a living faith. I know God, and I love God. I trust Him. I hope in Him. I follow Him and I am looking forward to being with Him forever!''* This is the kind of truth that will profoundly change the way you live.

We have been born again to a living hope – **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**. The resurrection of Jesus is the Father's guarantee to the believer that he will be raised to new life. The resurrection of Christ is the foundation of the gospel message. Without it, it is just good advice. This is the thing that sets Christianity apart from every other religion in the world. Mohammed was not raised, Joseph Smith is still dead, Buddha is one with the earth, Confucius still lies like John Brown, 'a mouldering in his grave' – only Jesus Christ was raised to life – and everywhere the gospel is preached, this one thing must be emphasized – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! For those that are searching for true meaning in life – for those who want to know which way is the true way – just take a look at the founders of all religions and ask yourself which one is more believable. But if I were a betting man, I'd put my money on the guy that came back from the dead.

Peter says, 'Look what's happened – you've been born again to a living hope'. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the guarantee of our living hope. **Our hope is living, because Jesus is living**. In other words, hope is not a thing. It is not like 'I hope the Seahawks win today', which implies that it might be possible for them to lose. It is uncertain whether or not they will prevail. This hope is not that. The way Peter puts this implies that our hope is not some uncertain longing, but that it is a certainty that is altogether wrapped up in a person, Jesus Christ. He is the substance and the content of hope. Writing to Timothy, Paul puts it like this: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.*<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, to say that Christians have a living hope is to imply that all other hope is dead hope. If your hope is wrapped up in Mohammed or Buddha or Joseph Smith, or anything or anyone other than Christ, all you can expect at the end is death. They're not living. But with Christ we have a living hope.

We've been born again to a living hope, and then Peter points us to **what will happen, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you**. In other words, the point of being born again is to receive an inheritance. And our inheritance is reserved in Heaven for us. It won't go away, it isn't dependent upon the stock market for its value, it won't diminish through taxes or service charges or lawyer's fees – it is imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away. And I think the point Peter was trying to make to the believers is that as strangers and aliens on this earth, as sojourners in this life, **don't look down here for your reward – your reward is in Heaven**. Don't work hard to make this life your best life now. Peter uses three powerful words to describe this inheritance: **imperishable, undefiled, and unfading**. In other words, this eternal inheritance is everything any earthly inheritance is not. One commentator put it like this: *'Each of these words in its own way drives home the point that the inheritance of which Peter speaks is an eternal one...imperishable refers to freedom from death and decay, undefiled to freedom from uncleanness or moral impurity, and unfading to freedom from the natural ravages of time.'*<sup>3</sup> **Untouched by death, unstained by evil, unimpaired by time.**

Is there anything like that on earth? There is nothing living that will not eventually die and decay. And even on your best days, your motives are shot through with selfishness and self-seeking. Everything around us is subject to the relentless ravages of time. Everything fades. In spite of every effort one day your health will go, your looks will go, your money will go. Can you imagine a state in which none of that is true? Death is not even a memory, all of your motives are pure, nothing fades? That's what's waiting. That's what is being kept for you.

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2 1 Timothy 1:1 ESV

3 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), 85,86

This was incredibly important to these sojourners. They had been scattered all over, sown as seeds of the gospel. They were living as strangers in a strange land, and they had no inheritance there. But here comes the promise of an eternal inheritance. It is as if Peter were saying, 'Look I know that here you are suffering and going through hard things. But I want you to remember that these few years are only in preparation for eternity. And you have this incredible inheritance waiting for you, kept for you, in heaven. And one day we will see the one whom our soul loves. Don't lose sight of that!' And you might say, 'That sounds like a bribe.' No, it's not a bribe – it's reality.

The motivation of this heavenly inheritance is to get our eyes off ourselves and our present troubles and look ahead to the glory to come. It is a means to free our hearts from the seductive lure of temporary treasure to our eternal treasure. C.S. Lewis put it like this: *We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.*<sup>4</sup> You can hear this in the apostle John's voice in his first letter. He was known as the beloved disciple. He was always with Jesus when Jesus was on this earth, and his one great ambition was to be with him again. *'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as He is pure.'*<sup>5</sup>

The Bible is full of references to our inheritance, beginning with the promises to Israel of the Promised land in the Old and continuing with the writers of the New Testament. It is always pointing us to what will happen. *'[In Him] also we have obtained an inheritance...'*<sup>6</sup> Paul writes to the Ephesians. And again in that letter he says, *'I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.'*<sup>7</sup> And to the Colossians he says, *'Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance...'*<sup>8</sup> And the writer to the Hebrews, in speaking of Jesus, says *'Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.'*<sup>9</sup>

To those who are sojourners, these promises are powerful incentives for hope. They are powerful motivations to persevere and endure. After all, this life is temporary, this reality is fleeting, all we see around us will one day be gone as if it never were. Why not look to things eternal? Things that will last. But the uncertainty of life makes us want to ask, "But how can we be sure? How can we know that God will bring us all the way in? And Peter answers that with the next phrase, pointing us to **what is happening**. This inheritance is reserved in heaven for you, *5 who by God's power are being guarded [garrisoned] through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* The assurance that we will receive the inheritance God has for us is that He is the one who will protect not only the inheritance – but us, until we receive it. God has the best protection racket going. No one's going to mess up anything He's protecting. If you're going to get some protection today – make sure it's God.

Here's what Peter is saying: "There is a final element to salvation, it is going to be revealed at some point in the future, not yet, because this thing is not yet complete. The proof of that is we have not yet received our promised inheritance, and there is much more grace and glory and growing to be experienced. On the way, there are troubles and trials and sufferings, there are dangers ahead, and for that we need God's protection. On the one hand, our salvation is assured, but that does not mean we can sit back and put our feet up. There are battles to be fought and victories to be won and in this we need the power of God to keep us and protect us. God fights for us with omnipotent power and the means God uses to protect us is faith - *'... protected by the power of God through faith...'* So what are we protected from?

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4 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*,

5 1 John 3:2-3 ESV

6 Ephesians 1:11 ESV

7 Ephesians 1:18 ESV

8 Colossians 3:24 ESV

9 Hebrews 9:15 ESV

He isn't protecting us from death – chosen saints of God still die. He isn't protecting us from sickness – we still get sick. He isn't protecting us from suffering – in fact suffering is a great help heavenward. Octavius Winslow, one of the great preachers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century said: *'There are few things in the spiritual history of the child of God more really helpful heavenward than sanctified trial.'*<sup>10</sup> Trials then, are not hindrances, trials actually work to help us to heaven. So if He is not protecting us from trouble, what is God protecting us from? The protection here, I believe, is the protection that God gives to all those who are chosen and called from the **threat of losing our final salvation in falling away through unbelief**. It is God's power that protects us by sustaining our faith, because the only thing that can keep us from Heaven is forsaking our faith in Christ, and turning to other hopes or treasures. You see, we are *'...protected by the power of God through faith...'* Through faith is a key phrase here. It is confident assurance in our Father who chose us and caused us to be born again, the Holy Spirit who brought us to God and sanctified us, and Jesus who cleansed us from every stain of sin, so that we will make it all the way to glory.

Peter says that is reason for joy: *6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials*, This should cause our hearts to rejoice whenever we think of it – especially when the anticipation of eternal joy is weighted down with various trials. Peter seems to indicate that various trials may not be necessary for everyone – He says, *'if necessary'*. Well if that is true, I'll pass on the trials, thank you very much. But I don't think that is what he is actually saying. Another way to translate this might be – *'...even though now for a little while, [since necessarily], you have been distressed by various trials'*. Trials are necessary – **trials prove what kind of faith we have, or if we have any faith at all**. Trials stress us, and distress us – the word **distressed** in Greek means to lament or have deep sorrow over something. Trials are designed to bring us to God and to keep us depending on God by exposing our real condition.

*There was a farmer who had three sons: Ron, Don and Little John. They all had their names on the church roll but none of them had ever attended church or had any time for God. Then one day Don was bitten by a rattlesnake. The doctor was called and he did all he could to help Don, but the outlook for his recovery was very dim indeed. So the pastor was called in and he began to pray: 'O wise and righteous Father, we thank You that in Your wisdom You sent this rattlesnake to bite Don. He hasn't been inside the church in years and has shown little interest in You. We trust that this trial will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead to his genuine repentance. And now, O Father, send another rattlesnake to bite Ron, and another to bite Little John, and another really big one to bite the old man. For years we have done everything we know to get them to get serious with You and nothing has worked. We thank you God for rattlesnakes.'*

Peter says that genuine faith is tested faith: *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*. The testing of our faith is the testing of the genuineness of it. How genuine is your faith? Well, you don't really know until it has been tested. Faith that cannot withstand testing, cannot be trusted. An old preacher put it this way: **"If your faith fizzles before the finish, it was faulty from the first"** A newspaper reporter phoned a story into his editor about an empty truck that rolled down a hill and smashed into a house. His editor was unimpressed and told the reporter it wasn't that newsworthy and he didn't want to run the story. 'I'm glad you're taking this all so calmly' the reporter said. 'It was your house.'

Faith is always an academic question until it's our house that gets smashed. Testing will prove the quality of your faith. Testing will show what we've been trusting in. When gold is refined, melted in the fire, all the impurities, all the junk, everything that is not genuine gold, floats to the top and is skimmed off. Those impurities are called 'dross'. The dross in our faith hinders and blocks the goodness and greatness of God in our lives; and God's design is for the furnace of affliction to burn it all away until eventually all the dross is in the slag heap and all that remains is pure gold. Real faith is tested in the furnace of affliction and comes out stronger. But all that is left of an intellectual faith that has been through the fire is dross. Until we have passed through the crucible of fire, we have only an intellectual relationship with faith – or we may not have any faith at all.

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10 Octavius Winslow, *Help Heavenward*, <http://gracegems.org/WINSLOW/Trial,%20a%20Help%20Heavenward.htm>

And so the testing is crucial for two things – **it exposes our faithlessness, and it refines the faith we do have.** There are so many impurities in our faith – murmuring, whining, trusting money, or position or those things we can see, rather than God whom we cannot, blaming God and everyone else for our predicament, unforgiveness and bitterness, our pride and self-sufficiency – that fire is necessary to bring those things to the top. This is not so God can say, 'See, I knew your faith was deficient' – but rather so He can cleanse our faith of the dross and our faith would be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus returns. It's good for us to remember that **God is not an arsonist; He's a refiner.** *'Our God is a consuming fire'* refers to His purifying work in our lives.

The reason our faith is tested by fire is that the only thing that will make it through the fire is genuine faith. God does not want His children depending on a faith that will ultimately fail in times of stress. The only faith that makes it through the testing and trials is God-born and God-sustained faith. These necessary trials serve to highlight God's great sustaining power and majesty, not our dogged determination to slog through. God's design in testing our faith is not only to purify our faith, but to increase our joy. And the reason for joy is founded on what has happened – we are God's chosen exiles, born again to a living hope, and in the great and glorious future God has for us, an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, reserved in heaven for us, and His unswerving commitment to keep it for us and to keep us for it. *'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, as though some strange thing were happening to you – but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that at the revelation of His glory you will rejoice with exultation.'* 1 Peter 4:12-13

Martin Luther wrote: *"If we consider the greatness and the glory of the life we shall have when we have risen from the dead, it would not be difficult at all for us to bear the concerns of this world. If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: "O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!"*<sup>11</sup>

This is the trouble we have. We don't see it. What we see is trouble. What we see is suffering. What we see is this little bit of the rope that is visible. And Peter says the same thing to his readers: *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.* He points them to the reality of eternity, and says 'You don't see Him right now. But one day you will. This little moment of time will soon be over and you'll see eternal joy spread out before you. Rejoice!'. *Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbbrand spent 14 years in prison for preaching the gospel. Although his captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned 18 holes in his body, they could not defeat him. He testified, "Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."*<sup>12</sup>

How is that possible? I think Richard Wurmbbrand knew what three young men once found out in the furnace of affliction. And I think Peter must have been thinking about this story when he began talking about being tested by fire. He must have had Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego in mind. These three young men refused to bow to the vain pretensions of the king of the world at that time and were tied up and thrown into a fiery furnace that was so hot it killed the guys who threw them in. And yet, when the king looked in to see how well they were burning, he got the shock of his life. Not only were they not burning, they were standing up and walking around in the furnace. And there was another guy in there with them. 'Didn't we throw three guys into the fire?' he asked his officials. 'Yes we did, only three'. 'But I see another guy in there and this guy looks like a son of God!'. And they open the doors and tell them to come out and the first three guys come out. But not the fourth. He doesn't come out.

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11 Martin Luther, quoted in *The Sunday Morning Experience* by Archie Carter, (Xulon Press, 2007), 40.

12 Richard Wurmbbrand, In *God's Underground*, (Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1968, 2004), 54.

And we know from the rest of the Bible and the testimony of Isaiah, that fourth guy in the fire was indeed the Son of God. Through Isaiah God tells His people, *'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.'*<sup>13</sup> In other words, he's telling us, 'You're going to suffer, you're going to go through some tough things, you're going to go through the fire. But don't be afraid. I'll be in there with you.' And it is in those times of great difficulty and trial that we see Him. Those three young men didn't see God before they went into the furnace. But He was already there, waiting for them.

You see, the Son of God went into the furnace **for** us so that He could be in the furnace **with** us. He drank the fiery cup of God's wrath that we deserved so that we would not be consumed. The Father sent His Son into the furnace of His wrath to take our punishment. So now the fires God brings into your life are meant to refine you, not destroy you. You see this image of God's fire all the way through the Bible, and it is always doing two things. It is burning to destroy the evil and refine the holy. You see, suffering and trouble can either bless you or break you. You will come out on the other side either bitter or better. It all depend on whether you meet the Son of God in the fire. The question is, 'Do you know for certain, that when you go into the fire Jesus will be there for you?' It is only if you trust in Him today that you can be confident that He will be there for you tomorrow.

If you don't know Him, if you've never put your trust in Jesus, you can't know that He'll be there in the fire for you. He certainly wasn't for the soldiers that threw those three young Hebrew men in the furnace. They died. The promise is for those who have been born again to a living hope. And unless you've been born again, there's no hope, living or otherwise. The thing is, suffering will happen, trouble will come, trials will come at us, and the question is, will they bless you or break you? Will they make you bitter or better? The only way these things can turn out for your good is if you put your trust in the one who has been through the fire for you and will be with you in the fire. So I urge you to put your trust in Jesus today. He's the only one who can bring you safely through the fire.

*Heavenly Father,*

*We revel in Your great mercy this morning that brought us to You and caused us to be born again to a living hope. Let our hearts and minds dwell on eternity and the great inheritance You are keeping for us. Don't let the trials and sufferings of this life cause us to question Your great goodness and love for us. Grant us we pray, the solid assurance that when You put us in the furnace, You'll be there beside us. Incline our hearts to Your promises and let Your word of truth transform our thinking and our speaking and our living; let it break every bondage to lesser things; let it generate and sustain and confirm a genuine faith in us that causes our being to reverberate with joy inexpressible and full of glory. In the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.*