

## INTRODUCTION

Is there such a thing as Christian suffering? Many Christians think those two words, “Christian” and “suffering” shouldn’t be joined. There *are* some words that sound funny together. For instance, I came across a funny top ten list of rejected sports team names from around the world:

10. You’ve heard of Brussels, Belgium but would they call their team the Brussels Sprouts?
9. Amsterdam is a lovely city in Holland, but they probably wouldn’t have a team called the Amsterdam Yankees (although it sounds pretty normal down here in Texas!)
8. In the Czech Republic, they should they have a national team named the Czech Bouncers.
7. In Argentina, I don’t believe Buenos Aires would ever have the Buenos Airheads, do you?
6. What about the Iraqi Raccoons? (an old Beatles song, if you don’t remember)
5. In Seoul, Korea, how about the Seoul Brothers?
4. In Taiwan, they probably wouldn’t have a team named the Taipei Personalities.
3. In Hungary, how about the Hungary Jacks?
2. Or in India, could you imagine a team named the New Delhi Catessans?
1. In the capital city of the Czech Republic, Prague, I doubt there’ll ever be a team called the Prague Tologists!

For many people, the label Christian suffering sounds as out-of-place as some of those imaginary sports teams. They insist a Christian should never have to endure pain and suffering. But the Bible speaks plainly about the reality of suffering in the life of a Christian.

Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering terrible persecution. While Nero was Emperor in Rome, there was a great fire which destroyed two-thirds of the city. Historians suggest Nero set the fire and then fiddled around while the city burned. Regardless of how it started, Nero blamed Christians for the fire. As a result, the persecution against believers was intense during this time.

He wrote his letter to encourage suffering Saints. Peter addressed the topic of suffering fifteen times in just five chapters. Today, we are going to examine the topic of suffering as we study the message found in 1 Peter 1:6-9. The message theme is “Refined by Fire.” The Bible says:

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Peter warns us that even though we are followers of Jesus, we will experience trials. The word “trial” is another word for “trouble” or “tribulation.” A trial is a painful experience that, given the choice, we would always avoid if possible. But since we are going to face trials, we should learn as much as we can about what trials are and how we should react to suffering. Let’s examine four important principles about the trials and tribulations that we face.

## 1. TRIALS COME IN A VARIETY OF FORMS

Peter writes in verse 6: “For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” It’s important to understand that a trial is not the same thing as a temptation. In the first chapter of James’ epistle he writes about both trials and temptations. He makes a distinction between them. Here are some differences: A temptation is devised by Satan to make you sin; a trial is allowed by God to let you shine; a temptation is designed to drive you away from God; but a trial is designed to draw you closer to God; a temptation will weaken you; a trial will strengthen you. A temptation is never unbearable (the Bible says you’ll never be tempted beyond what you are able); whereas a trial is often beyond our ability to endure on our own (see the message “God Won’t Put More on You Than You Can Bear” from the series “No, that’s NOT in the Bible!”) A temptation must be resisted, but a trial must be embraced but sadly we often resist God’s trials and embrace temptations!

Peter writes we will suffer “all kinds of trials.” That’s a phrase that means “variegated colors.” It’s like a stained glass window comprised of hundreds of different colored pieces of glass. An isolated trial is like one piece of glass—it may be confusing. But when you take all the trials you’ll face together, you can see God is creating something beautiful and valuable of your life.

You may face a financial trial when you don’t have enough money or sometimes a harder trial is when you have more money than you really need to live! What you do with it is a trial. You may face a physical trial, when the doctor tells you that you have some kind of illness and your life is immediately changed. Some of you are facing marriage trials, or vocational trials—as many color variations as you can find in the universe—that’s the kind of variety you may expect in trials and tribulations.

Nobody is immune to trouble. There was a man in the Old Testament who knew a little about suffering; his name was Job. Satan accused Job of being spoiled rotten. He was a God-fearing man because he had so many blessings. Satan contended before God that if Job lost his blessings he would also lose his faith. So God allowed trials and tribulations to come into Job’s life. In a short period of time Job lost his wealth, his family, and his health. In the middle of all of his adversity, Job made the following observation: “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” (Job 5:7) It is the nature of fire to throw sparks upward. And as Job observed, it is part of our nature to experience pain and suffering. We know Job’s suffering was a test—and he passed the test. His wife and friends told him to “curse God and die.” Instead Job came to a place where he said, “I know that my redeemer lives! And I shall see Him someday!”

When you’re being tested it’s important to remember God set a limit to what Satan could do in testing Job. In the same way, our trials may come from Satan, but they are filtered by God. When I make coffee every morning, I put a paper filter in the coffee maker. I don’t want to have the coffee grounds in my cup. It’s good to know that all of your trials have to pass through the filter of God’s grace, and the filter of His mercy, and the filter of His omnipotence.

What painful experience are you facing right now? Would it make a difference if you knew it was a test? How would you respond if you were going through the same test Job faced? I saw a

funny cartoon recently. A small child was standing at her teacher’s desk and the caption read, “I don’t want to scare you, but my daddy says if I don’t get better grades *somebody* is going to get a spanking!”

For a Christian, suffering is like that Emergency Broadcasting System announcement you hear on the television and radio. They break in and say, “This is a test, this is only a test.” When you face trials and tribulations, just say to yourself: THIS IS A TEST—THIS IS ONLY A TEST!

## 2. TRIALS REVEAL THE PURITY OF YOUR FAITH

Peter writes in verse 7: “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine.” Gold is a fascinating commodity; it has been valuable for centuries. I like the funny story of the guy who made a deal with God. He said, “God, I know you say that ‘I can’t take it with me’ when I go to heaven, but, please, will you let me take just one suitcase with me to heaven?” The Lord said, “Sure.” So, before the guy died, he cashed in all his investments and bought pure gold bars to take to heaven - he wanted to be the richest guy in heaven. The day came when he died, as all must do, and he arrived at the Pearly Gates lugging his suitcase. The angels on duty said, “It’s unusual for someone to bring a suitcase into heaven, but we understand you made a deal with the Boss. But we’ll have to check the contents of your suitcase.” The guy handed it over, and one of the angels opened it. The other angel said, “What is it?” The first angel scratched his head and said, “You won’t believe it, but he just brought a suitcase full of pavement.”

Gold is rare and valuable on earth, but John writes that in heaven, there are streets of gold! The reason gold is valuable on earth is because it is rare. Peter writes that there is something we possess that is of greater value than gold—our faith. Like gold, our faith is refined by the fire of suffering.

Gold is often embedded in rock, and must be refined. It is placed in a crucible and heated to a high temperature. As the gold melts, it can be extracted from the other elements. Even today, there are different levels of purity of gold used in jewelry. Gold can be combined with other metals to form an alloy that isn’t pure gold. 14 karat gold is not pure, like 24 karat gold. To produce pure gold, the alloy has to be refined by fire.

Some costume jewelry is made of steel covered with gold paint. I have a friend who has been in the wholesale jewelry business for years. He sold the real thing, but he sometimes sold costume jewelry as well. He once gave me a ring that looked great—but the metal was only painted gold and the diamond was actually cubic zirconium! Over the years, the gold paint has worn off until the real nature of the metal has been revealed. If this ring was put into a refiner’s fire, it would be proved an imitation.

God often refines our faith for two reasons: (1) To prove our faith is genuine; and (2) To purify our faith. It is only in the fire of suffering that you discover whether your faith is genuine, or if it’s a cheap imitation. When it is summertime and the living is easy, and the fish are jumping, and the cotton is high, it’s easy to say you have faith. But it is during the tough times your faith is proved.

The Bible compares our faith to gold and silver, and God is the refiner. He sometimes turns up the heat so our faith can be purified. Like gold or silver, our faith often contains impurities. It is through the fire of suffering our faith is simplified and purified. In Isaiah 48:10 we read: God says, “See I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.” Is your faith the real thing—in the furnace of affliction, your faith is tested and proved.

Nobody likes to go the fire of affliction, but if your faith is real, it only makes your faith more valuable. Dr. Dale Lunsford is Vice President for Student Affairs for the University of Texas at Tyler, and a faithful member of our church. When we traveled together to China recently Dr. Lunsford shared his faith story with me. In the spring of 2002 he started having throat problems and the tests revealed he had cancer in his lymph glands and throat. That’s a scary diagnosis for anyone. After surgery he started a process of receiving 42 radiation treatments. He and Marsha moved to Houston while he received this treatment at M.D. Anderson. It was a horrible, painful process. He was strapped down to a metal table for thirty minutes while the radiation was directed to different parts of his throat. He was literally going through the fire because the radiation was burning away the affected tissue. It was not a pleasant experience. He lost forty pounds, and his hair came out in clumps. His throat hurt so badly he couldn’t swallow water without taking pain medication.

But he told me during that time, he was faced with a this question, “Is what I *say* I believe about God *real* or is it just something that sounds good when everything is going well?” He said it was spiritual gut check. When he was at the lowest point, he really considered that he might die, yet when he looked death in the eye, he discovered he wasn’t afraid to die. During his treatments, the song that meant the most to him was “I Can Only Imagine” by Mercy Me. He would have it played during his treatments, and he came to understand his worst case scenario was meeting Jesus face to face—and that wasn’t a scary thing.

His last two check ups have revealed no reoccurrence of the cancer, and as he looks back on that experience he wouldn’t wish it on anyone. Yet, he said that he made a valuable discovery: His faith is *real*, like pure gold. In addition, he discovered his faith was purified, and became stronger through that ordeal.

Are you facing a hot furnace of affliction right now? God isn’t the author of suffering, but He can use it. Cancer, sickness and disease are the consequences of living in a fallen, corrupted world. But when you find yourself in the fire of affliction, remember God is testing you. Your faith may still have some impurities so God may turn up the heat to get rid of those impurities. So if you’re suffering right now, remember that although the fire is not pleasant, it is proving and purifying your faith. Don’t worry—you won’t be consumed by the fire—God loves you and He is still in control. Remember: God may not ignite the fire of affliction, but He controls the thermostat!

You may wonder when He’s going to turn down the heat. It’s when the refining process is finished. A silversmith looks into the crucible and watches as the purified silver floats to the top. The way he knows the silver is purified is when he can see a perfect reflection of his face in the

molten silver. As the refiner, God is looking at you, and when He sees the reflection of the character of Jesus in your life, that episode of refining is usually completed.

### **3. TRIALS FORCE YOU TO FOCUS ON JESUS**

Trials are difficult, and the only way to endure them is to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Peter makes it clear that we can't see Him with our eyes of flesh, but we still believe in Him. He wrote in verses seven and eight: "...when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him." It would be easy to believe if you could see Jesus in the flesh standing in front of you when you were suffering. But Peter is telling us that we must develop eyes of faith.

God has a way of getting our attention when we're suffering. After coming through a time of caring for his wife as she died of cancer, C.S. Lewis wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures but He shouts to us in our pain. Suffering is God's megaphone to awake a sleeping world." That's why we need to embrace the trials we experience rather than running from them.

On the first Easter Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. Thomas wasn't there. Later, the disciples told Thomas Jesus was alive, and he didn't believe them. He said, "Unless I can see Him with my eyes and put my fingers in the nail prints and wound in His side I won't believe!" That's why we call him doubting Thomas.

A week later Jesus appeared again and Thomas was present. Jesus approached Thomas and said, "Here I am. Go ahead, put your fingers in my nail prints, and put your hand in this wound in my side." Thomas simply said, "My Lord, and my God!" Then Jesus made a profound statement about Thomas and about us. He said, "Because you have seen me you believed? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believed!" (John 20: 29) That's what Peter is writing—we haven't seen Jesus with our eyes of flesh, yet we look at him with our eyes of faith.

There's a great story in the Old Testament about keeping your eyes on God, even when you can't see Him. In 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat is king of Judah, and they were surrounded by a huge army. The Bible says Jehoshaphat was scared, yet he prayed a powerful prayer of faith found in 2 Chronicles 20:12: King Jehoshaphat prayed: "O, God, we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." Then Jehoshaphat devised an unusual battle plan. He put the choir on the front line and they marched into battle singing songs of praise to God. And the Bible says the LORD set ambushes against their enemies and they started fighting among themselves until they killed each other.

What a powerful lesson! When you face an enemy that is overwhelming, don't focus on the enemy, put your eyes on God. Then approach that difficult situation with praise on your lips, and you will always experience victory. When you are suffering, don't focus on your problem or on your pain, focus on God, and when you focus on God, you'll want to praise Him.

When our girls were little we used to sing a song Jack Taylor taught us. It goes, "It's amazing what praising will do. Hallelujah. Hallelujah! It's amazing what praising will do! Hallelujah! I

don't worry when things go wrong. Jesus fills my heart with a song. It's amazing what praising will do. Hallelujah!”

Remember, this is the big fisherman, Peter, writing this letter. He knew what it was to keep your eyes on Jesus, and he knew what happened when you took your eyes off Jesus. One night Jesus came walking on the water to join the disciples. Peter asked Jesus if he could walk on the water, and Jesus said, “Come on!” Peter stepped out on faith and started walking on the water. He wasn't really walking on water; he was walking on the Word of Jesus. But the Bible says Peter took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the wind and the waves. When he did, he began to sink. When you look at your difficulties and problems, you are in trouble. But if you focus on Jesus, you can walk to victory!

#### **4. TRIALS CAN PRODUCE INEXPRESSIBLE JOY**

In verse six Peter writes, “In this you greatly rejoice,” and again in verses eight and nine: “You are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” He repeats that admonition that we should rejoice when we face trials and suffering. Remember, I told you in the last lesson rejoicing is not a feeling—it's a choice!

That's one of the things that makes us different from those who don't know Jesus: We should express joy, even when we are suffering.

When you are going through the furnace of affliction, you are forced to depend on God. One reason God allows you to suffer is so you will grab hold of His power with both hands. There's a beautiful song entitled “Treasures” that says: One by one He took them from me, / All the things I valued most / Until I was empty handed, / Every glittering toy was lost. / And I walked earth's highway grieving / In my rags and poverty / Till I heard His voice inviting, / “Lift your empty hands to Me.” / So I held my hands toward Heaven, / And He filled them with a store / Of His own transcendent riches / Till they could contain no more. / And at that I comprehended, / With my stupid mind and dull / That God could not pour His riches / Into hands already full.

It may be that you're suffering right now because God is trying to teach you that He is all you need. The promise of God is that we will suffer, but it's only for a little while. Even if you suffer for 80 years, that's just a blip on the timeline of eternity. There are plenty of experiences that cause us pain, and our eyes often fill up with tears, but God promises in eternity He will wipe all the tears from our eyes. He gives us a great promise in Psalm 30:5: “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” You may be suffering in the dark night of depression and discouragement, but you can know that the morning is coming. That morning is coming, but we don't have to wait until the morning to rejoice. We can rejoice NOW!

In the last lesson I gave you a way to remember what hope is: Having Only Positive Expectations. Let me give you an acrostic for SUFFER: Step Up For Faith's Eternal Reward. When you suffer, understand that it's a test, this is only a test. Understand that your faith is more valuable than gold and you are going through a refining process. Focus your eyes on Jesus, even though you don't see Him, trust Him. And then you'll be able to rejoice.

## **CONCLUSION**

The greatest contradiction in this world is a joyless Christian. Once when Martin Luther was going through a period of depression, his wife, Katie came into his study wearing all black, with her face covered with a black veil. Martin Luther asked her, "Who died?" She said, "God died." Luther responded, "Silly woman, God hasn't died." She said, "Oh, I thought by the way you were acting that God had died." She wanted to remind him that Jesus is alive and God is in control. It worked, and Martin Luther left his bad mood and began to rejoice again. Let me ask you, "Has God died?" "Is Jesus alive?" Then let's show the world we can rejoice, even when we are suffering.

## OUTLINE

### 1. TRIALS COME IN A VARIETY OF FORMS

Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward. *Job 5:7*

### 2. TRIALS REVEAL THE PURITY OF YOUR FAITH

God says, “See I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”  
*Isaiah 48:10*

### 3. TRIALS FORCE YOU TO FOCUS ON JESUS

King Jehoshaphat prayed: “O, God, we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our EYES ARE UPON YOU.” *2 Chronicles 20:12*

### 4. TRIALS CAN PRODUCE INEXPRESSIBLE JOY

Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. *Psalms 30:5*





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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes