

IT'S ONLY A TEST

1 PETER 1:6-12

In 1963 the Kennedy Administration created the Emergency Broadcast System to give the President a means of addressing the nation in the event of a nuclear attack. Thankfully, the system was never used for that purpose.

But it did leave a legacy. If you lived in the 60s you remember the experience... You'd be watching television when suddenly a test pattern – strange symbols and configurations appeared on the screen - followed by a shrill, high-pitched siren – then a voice that said, **“This is a test. If this were an actual emergency you would have been instructed to tune to one of the broadcast stations in your area. This is only a test.”**

As a young boy, living at the height of the Cold War - in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis – whenever that announcement ran on television it produced in me a tinge of fear, **“Is this the one? Could this be real?”**

The most comforting words were, **“This is only a test.”**

And when difficulty strikes my life today, it's vital I recall this phrase - **“This is a test. This is only a test. If this were an actual emergency...”**

All too often, what we assume are emergencies are really just tests.

Understand, God is not surprised when my life encounters adversity. He doesn't hit the panic button. God isn't puzzled

and groping to make sense of my situation. *The living God is in charge of all of life – good and bad!*

He's in control of the very circumstances that are stressing you out.

In fact, listen closely this morning, and you'll probably hear God saying to you, "This is not an actual emergency... this is a test. It's only a test."

Peter learned this truth at the foot of the cross. We're approaching the Easter season, and for most folks the cross is an emotional experience.

Contemplate the cross – what Jesus endured... its intensity... its totality.

It reminds us that the cost of forgiveness is steep – it's expensive. The cross stirs our passions. At Mount Calvary grown men choke back tears.

But hopefully, that's not all we learn at the cross.

For the person who stands there long enough to look through the tears, and see past the emotions, the cross becomes our tutor in spiritual truth.

The crucifixion revolutionizes our perspective on pain and trials. Jesus on the cross challenges faulty assumptions and gives us strategic insight.

This is what it did for Peter. From the beginning he believed Jesus was the Messiah, but his concept of what Messiah came to do was transformed at Calvary's cross. Peter knew one day Messiah would reign and rule – but the necessity of the cross proved to Peter that *grieving precedes glory* –

and death comes before life - and pain blossoms into pleasure.

In short, trials are necessary.

Faith has to be tested and refined through the fires of hardship.

If the suffering of the cross was a part of God's plan for His own Son Jesus - Peter realized pain and suffering would also be a feature in God's plan for him... And let me add... *God's plan for you!*

In fact, Peter got to a place in his life where he appreciated the crosses and trials... He embraced them - thanked God for them - even rejoiced in them. And he wants us do likewise - *rejoice in the hardship God allows!*

Peter writes in verse 6, **"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ..."** What a message!

As a pastor I deal with people's trials daily. Life is hard. Sometimes our sin makes life harder than it has to be. But life is tough even when you do right. In fact, at times life becomes tougher when you choose to do right.

Life is full of surprises – and many of them are unpleasant.

I know Christians who experience a setback or two, and act shocked that it could happen to them. They respond as if

somehow *faith in Jesus* exempts them from any type of trouble. *Hey, just the opposite is true...*

Real faith is a lightning rod for hardship. Faith has to be tested...

And when faith gets tested it's easy to react the wrong way! Job's friends tried to condemn him, as if he'd committed a specific sin that warranted his calamity. This is the worst mistake we can make.

A believer's faith is being tested – God is doing what's necessary to cause growth – and we interpret it as punishment... *That's a cruelty.*

Other people react *glibly*. They see a friend going through the grinder... His kid hates him, his wife leaves him, his own dog bites him, he's denied the promotion because he's a Christian – and we tell him, “*just pray about it*” - or “*try reading a Psalm each day*” - or “*take some Vitamin C...*”

It's like prescribing salt tablets to a cancer patient. It's very little help.

In fact, if you're suffering and you read a Psalm I hope it's the right one. A lot of the psalms are spewing angst, and erupting with vengeance and retaliation. They were written by people in far worse shape than you.

How does Peter react to trials and suffering? *He's not glib. He's not cruel. He's just honest. He's not trite, he's just truthful. A person who's going through it needs a big dose of honesty. Clarity is what helps.*

Peter provides some in verse 6. He states four truths about trials.

First, trials are **momentary**. Peter pens, “**though now for a little while...**”

If you’re going through a trial, understand it won’t last forever. In this life trials are a constant, but there is more to our existence than “*this life.*”

Hey, life is so short. This is my son Mack’s senior season at SG, and he’s playing baseball. The other night the boys were doing the post-game clean up - and Mack was on the tractor dragging the infield. I was in the press box, and I just sat there. I watched him. *Where did the time go?*

Just yesterday he was playing in the dirt in the backyard. Life is like a puff of warm breath on a winter’s day. Here one second, gone the next.

And compared to eternity it’s even shorter. In light of eternity the weeks or months or years you’re enduring right now are just a blip on the screen.

If you suffer for 70 years, spend your whole life in pain, then die and go to heaven – a thousand years from now the first 70 will feel negligible.

A person says, “**I’ve had a hard life.**” Well, be glad it was just a hard life. Big deal, it’s just a life. When a soldier dies in battle - or a martyr dies for their faith - it’s a reminder there’re much more important things than life.

The Bible teaches us there's far more to living than *this life*. There's a heaven and a hell... What you really want to avoid is *a hard eternity!*

I love the little old lady who was asked to name her favorite Bible verse.

She replied, "That's easy, Luke 2:1, '*And it came to pass...*' I'm so glad it came to pass, it didn't come to stay." Trials and suffering are momentary.

But notice the second truth about trials, they're **mandatory**...

Peter tells us trials come, and I quote, "**if need be.**" Apparently, God deems them necessary. It's the only way we can learn certain lessons.

I'm fond of saying, "**It takes the manure for us to mature.**" And it does.

Realize if there was any way for God to save us without Jesus suffering on the cross, God would have chosen a different method. But there was only one solution for our sin. The cross was absolutely necessary.

And so are the crosses in our lives. The trials and suffering we're called on to bear is for a reason. There are lessons God knows we could never learn without experiencing some painful and unpleasant circumstances.

Remember, it grieved the Father to sacrifice His Son, and it pains God to watch you and I endure hardship. He gets no pleasure from either. The only reason He tolerates suffering is

for its redeeming value. There are some truths we would never, ever grasp unless they came with a test.

When God calls on us to suffer we may never learn the whole reason, but we can be sure our trial is essential to accomplishing God's plans.

Here's a third truth about trials. They produce **misery**... They're no fun!

Peter tells us we are "**grieved**" by trials. Realize, it is okay for Christians to hurt. Grief is not a sin. Feelings like disappointment, discouragement, sorrow, frustration, even anger – are not sins. It's okay to get bummed.

Sometimes we get the impression that Christians are suppose to be like Vulcans – Dr. Spock – void of expression, emotion, passion. It's as if the whole Church is on Ritalin. God calls us to be *dedicated* not *medicated*.

A pastor in Houston, Texas leads the largest church in America, but he refuses to say anything negative to his congregation. He never talks about sin, or grief, or trials, or suffering... *He obviously doesn't teach the Bible.*

God's Word is full of good, godly people who endured miserable conditions. As a Christian you'll have your moments - when you're vexed, and ruffled, and agitated, and stretched. *You're grieved...*

And notice the fourth truth about trials. Peter tells his readers they've been grieved "**by various trials.**" Trials in this life will be **manifold**...

The OKJ renders “*various trials*” as this word, “*manifold trials.*”

The Greek word Peter uses means “*variegated*” or “*multi-colored.*” He’s saying trials come in different shapes, sizes, styles, and starts.

Some trials are the result of our sin... Sometime we’re innocent victims. Through no fault of our own a loved one can cause a trial that we have to address... And still other times, we’re the target for Satan and his devils.

I’ll never forget the retreat Kathy and I took to the mountains. We just got away for a few days – and had a wonderful time, until the last day...

I accidentally sat down on a wasp. It stung me right on the tush. And my, O my, did it hurt. I was sick for 3 days. Every joint in my body ached – *all due to a tiny little wasp.* Actually, I suspected it was a Yellow Jacket.

Sometimes trials sneak up on us. We don’t even know they’re there until they sting. At other times trials loom large. They’re all we can see. Trials come from folks we know. Trials come from folks we don’t...

Trials come in a wide variety of forms – and strike in different ways.

But notice what Peter says in verse 7 – it’s important – all trials come for the same purpose, “*that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...*”

The testing of our faith purifies and refines us.

Peter uses the illustration of a goldsmith. He turns up the heat – melts down the gold - then skims off the impurities. He repeats the procedure over and over, until finally, he can see his reflection in the surface of the metal. That's when he knows the gold is as pure as possible.

And this is how Jesus works in us. He turns up the heat on adversity a few degrees. He melts our pride and self-sufficiency – then He skims off the impurities in our character. And as the process is repeated over and over again, the likeness of our Lord Jesus begins to be formed in us...

Listen to a poem about the refiner's work...

He sat by a furnace of sevenfold heat, as He watched the precious ore; the closer He bent, with a searching gaze, He heated it more and more.

He knew He had ore that could stand the test; and wanted the finest of gold – to mold as a crown for the King; set with gems of a price untold.

So He laid out gold in the burning fire, though we wanted His hand to stay; and He watched the dross we hadn't seen, melt and pass away.

As the gold grew brighter; our eyes were dimmed with tears - we saw the fire – not the Master's hand – and questioned with anxious fears.

Our gold shone with a richer glow as it mirrored His form above. Though unseen by us - He bent over the fire - with looks of indescribable love.

Can we think it pleases His loving heart to cause us a moment of pain? Ah! No, but we saw through the present loss the bliss of eternal gain.

So He waited with a watchful eye, with a love so strong and sure; and His gold did not suffer a bit more heat, than was needed to make it pure.”

I'm moved by the final line, “His gold did not suffer a bit more heat, than was needed to make it pure.” Maybe today you're in a crucible of trouble.

God is testing the genuineness of your faith... Sure, you'll serve God when He blesses - when life is good... but what happens in the heat of adversity? How genuine is your faith? How sincere is your devotion?

Tom was 15, and his kid brother, Johnny, was 11, when Tom decided to bless his brother. Tom had a fort in the backyard. He and his friends had built a masterpiece of a fort. It was the envy of the neighborhood.

But a 15 year old is moving on to adult concerns. So one Christmas season Tom told his brother it was time for him to take possession of the fort. Johnny was so excited. *What he and his friends would do?*

Then on Christmas Eve, Tom dropped the bombshell. He said he had changed his mind. He was keeping the fort. Maybe he would reconsider next year. The 11 year old was crushed. His first impulse was to cry, or throw a tantrum - but he stuffed his tears. He said all he could, “Okay.”

On Christmas morning there was a gift for Johnny from his 15 year-old brother. It was the key to the fort. When Johnny

saw the unexpected key, he spun around and saw Tom grinning. The older brother explained the surprise, "It was a test, to see if you were ready to handle it. You were."

This is what God does in our lives through trials...

He tests the genuineness and sincerity of our faith. Are we ready for the good stuff He wants to bestow on us? Can we handle the blessings He's earmarked for you and me? *Or do we need a little more refinement?*

Should He turn the heat up again, and repeat the process? Peter says in verse 7, the goal is to be ready "at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

And speaking of Jesus... verse 8, "whom having not seen you love..."

While walking on the water, Peter learned the key to surviving the storms is to keep your eyes on Jesus, *but what if He's not seen?*

It reminds me of the college freshmen's first day in science class.

The professor walks in and asked, "All who believe in Jesus stand up?"

This freshman rose to his feet. The professor continued, "Can you feel, or see, or smell, or taste, or hear your God?" The freshman replied, "No, Sir." The prof snarled, "Then you sit down for your God does not exist."

The new student was unmoved. He addressed the professor, "Sir, may I ask you a question? Can you feel, or see, or smell, or taste, or hear, or see your brain?" The cocky

professor belted out, “Of course not”. The student answered, “Well then please sit down, for your brain does not exist!”

The point is, we all believe in realities we can't relate to with just the five senses. Love, and loyalty, and humor, and commitment, and patriotism are all invisible realities, yet we believe they exist. Likewise, with Jesus...

We cannot relate to Jesus tangibly or physically, but we can sense His presence and His love in our hearts – and we can love Him in return!

Helen Keller once said, “The best and most beautiful things in life cannot be seen or even touched... they must be felt with the heart.”

This is true of spiritual realities. We've never seen Jesus, but that shouldn't stop us from *knowing Him, touching Him, loving Him...*

It's a shallow person who limits what he believes to only what he can see with his eyes, or place under a microscope. He's a narrow thinker.

Faith opens up vistas that go beyond mere sight and sound. Skeptics use the term “*blind faith*” - but faith is far from blind. **Faith sees more not less.** It observes spiritual realities – heavenly, eternal beauty.

I like what CH Spurgeon once said, “**Little faith will take your soul to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your soul.**”

Peter says in verse 8, “**Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,**”

While Jesus was on earth His disciples were overwhelmed with joy. It was a 24/7 feast – a perpetual party... What a rush it was to see Jesus at work day-to-day.

In Mark 2 Jesus compared Him and His disciples to newlyweds at the reception. Living with Jesus was similar to the giddiness of love birds...

But now Peter no longer sees Jesus. He follows His Lord not by sight, but by faith... yet life is just as fun and thrilling as it was while Jesus was on earth. Peter still rejoiced with a joy that words can't describe. His life was still full of glory. *When Jesus departed the rejoicing never stopped.*

But what kept the partying going? Jesus was no longer *seen* – but He continued to be *sensed*. What continued to fuel the fire of their joy? *The answer... the Holy Spirit!* The Spirit took up where Jesus left off!

In Scripture the Holy Spirit is described as new wine. He brings joy and laughter and vitality to life. He's the divine bubbly. He adds sparkle.

The Holy Spirit is *the believer's buzz*.

On the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples they received **“joy inexpressible and full of glory.”** And if you want a joy that baffles description - ask Jesus to fill you with the Holy Spirit! Before you live today – ask Him! The Spirit will reveal Jesus to you if you believe.

And don't just have faith... *continue in your faith...* Peter tells us in verse 9, **“receiving the end of your faith - the salvation of your souls.”**

Here's what can happen... A person is coaxed to Christ, and converted. His sin and his need for a Savior, combine to stir up a faith in Jesus.

But then that faith gets tested – it's inevitable - and if he or she is not ready for the test, or if they misinterpret the test – faith gets derailed.

If you assume Jesus died on the cross to end all your troubles, or make your life a bed of roses – then the trial you face means He's failed to live up to His end of the deal. If that's your assumption your faith will fizzle. Your faith will grow flatter than a three week-old bottle of Coca-Cola.

Faith needs to remember that even though the trial is causing us some grief – it's **“only a test.”** *It's not a real emergency. It's a test.* At best it'll last just a little while - and it's absolutely needed. That trial is refining your faith.

In fact, I'll go one step further... I'm going to push you this morning. You need to ditch your baby faith and develop a grown-up faith. I'm issuing a challenge - **your faith doesn't just need to remember it should rejoice!**

You need to **“greatly rejoice”** for the trial God is allowing is *purposeful.*

This is the essence of Christian faith. At the cross of Jesus we learned that *grieving precedes glory, pain blossoms into pleasure, and life springs from death.* But if you don't believe it in your own life how can you say you have faith. *Without seeing we believe...* **“Having not seen (we) love...”**

When you scan the surface of your life and all you see is trouble. You need to go deeper and find the living Lord Jesus.

Plug into the power of the Holy Spirit, and **rejoice** with a “**joy inexpressible and full of glory.**”

Peter is pleading with us, don't let trials trip you up and steal your joy! With a little faith you can learn to see your trials as a reason to rejoice!

And this is why it's not enough to *start in faith* - we should *finish in faith*. Peter tells us to desire “**the end of your faith – the salvation of your soul.**”

The NT speaks of salvation in different phases... When we first trust in Jesus we're saved from the **penalty of sin**. As we grow, we're saved from the **power of sin**. When we reach heaven we'll be saved from this wicked world and the **predicament of sin**. But at every stage our part is *faith*.

Faith is not a one-time deal. Faith is like a muscle. We feed it, and grow it, and exercise it – or it withers and dies. Peter assures us, cultivate your faith and it'll eventually bring to pass, “**the salvation of your soul.**”

And he speaks of our salvation in verse 10, “**Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.**”

Peter adds that *our salvation* is the *same salvation* foretold by the OT prophets. Hebrew holy men predicted the “**time,**” the “**sufferings,**” the “**glories**” of the coming Messiah. And they all were fulfilled by Jesus.

Three hundred prophecies in all identify Jesus as the Messiah.

Micah 5 predicted Jesus' birthplace.

Daniel 9 the day He came to Israel.

Psalms 22 and **Isaiah 53** were written by men living hundreds of years before Jesus – yet are eyewitness reports of His sufferings on the cross.

Isaiah 65-66, as well as other verses, describes His future glory...

Peter concludes in verse 12, “To (these prophets) it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven...”

God ministered to the prophets with future generations in mind - not just Jews *in times past* and *in distant locations*, but they wrote to you and me.

And we're not their only audience. Peter finishes verse 12 by labeling the OT prophecies as “things which angels desire to look into.” Angels are intrigued with our salvation. Cherubim and seraphim wonder why God has gone to such efforts to forgive and refine the likes of us.

Apparently, a favorite angel pastime is to try to figure out why God loves the little human so much. Over the eons of time, angels have marveled at the mystery of God's love for the little mud-dobbers He calls “*Man*.”

We were made from mud – we'll return to mud – though we've been stamped with God's image all too often we

resemble mud in the way we live and think. I'm sure to majestic angels we are pretty unimpressive.

Angels are puzzled why God would suffer and die for one of us.

Here's the big take away from today's passage... Angels "*desire to look into*" salvation, but that's all they can do is look... probe... *contemplate*...

They can't *participate*. Salvation is not for angels. Those who rebelled, and fell with Satan, are lost forever. Salvation is for us and our friends.

This is why you can't lose out! You can't miss the opportunity to *have faith* and *know Jesus*. Angels envy *the love God has shown us* - and *the access He offers us*. It boggles their minds that God treats us with such goodness. They blow a gasket when they see us reject His grace.

And Peter knows that the number one obstacle to faith is *suffering*.

Don't let trials trip you up! We need clarity... Remember the cross and **rejoice** "*that the genuineness of our faith... is tested by fire (that it) may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*"

Trials are **manifold**. Trials are **miserable**. But trials are **mandatory** if we want to grow. And don't forget trials are **momentary**. That helps too.

When life gets really hard, *remember* the cross and *rejoice* in the truth... "This is a test. This is not an actual emergency. This trial is only a test."