

God's Purpose in Our Grief



Gary Wilkerson July 20, 2020

And Jesus' Glory Through It!

What happens to our soul when we experience deep, personal grief? What role does grief have in our walk with Jesus? In one brief passage, Peter explains it all. "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (*1 Peter 1:6-7, ESV*).

Peter tells us three important things here about the griefs we experience: 1) Grief is sorrow for a season; 2) it leads us into a tested, purified faith; 3) it is a vehicle that results in powerful displays of God's glory. Who would think something so sorrowful could end up blessing us so greatly?

The first stage of any type of grief is the hardest to endure. The last thing you'll hear any sensible person say is "I could use another trial in my life right now." Peter was aware of this when he wrote to this group of Christians in exile. They'd been forced out of their homeland and into an environment that was hostile to them. Peter knew what they must have felt as he wrote, "...now for a little while, if necessary, you have been *grieved* by various trials" (*1:6, my emphasis*).

The Greek word for "grieved" here speaks of deep, churning emotions. All of us have faced trials that exacted a heavy emotional toll. Peter reminded his readers this was normal. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (*4:12*). He was assuring them, "Your grievous trial didn't take God by surprise. He understands, and he's at work in the midst of it, producing something that will not only bless you but will astonish the world."

Many Christians feel guilty and even apologetic just for having trials.

Ninety percent of the people I counseled as a church pastor came to me because they were going through very hard times. When I asked how their ordeal made them feel, they never mentioned any emotions. They always answered, "I think it will get better soon," or "I just need to stand on God's promises." Clearly, though, they were worried, troubled, unable to sleep. I had to press them about their emotions, sometimes asking several times, until they finally allowed themselves to say, "It feels awful, terrible, like I'm in hell!" Almost always, they were relieved to say it.

It didn't occur to them that the Bible is full of those very expressions, echoed by heroes of the faith. David sang openly of his grief. "Every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping" (*Psalms 6:6*). He pleaded with God to pay attention to his grief, saying, "Put my tears in your bottle" (*56:8*).

Deep grief encompasses more than sadness. Jeremiah's grief pushed him to angry accusations at God. Persecuted and tortured, the prophet cried out, "O Lord, you have deceived me" (*Jeremiah 20:7*). Our greatest example of anguished expression is Jesus' own cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me?" (*Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34*).

I'm grateful the authors of these accounts included every emotion for our sakes. We see great wounds, sorrows and excruciating pain, each passage instructing us to treat our griefs seriously and not superficially. When we're able to say, "I'm hurting, and I need help," it's the beginning of a testimony. Our witness to God's merciful, delivering power grows from the reality of a terrible circumstance.

Consider the testimony of Daniel's three friends who refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's idols. These men worshiped the one true God so that when they were threatened with death, they answered, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king" (*Daniel 3:17*).

This was a bold statement to make to a ruler who held the power of life and death in his hands. Make no mistake. These men knew the deadly reality they faced by taking their stand. "*But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (*3:18, my emphasis*). They were saying, in other words, "The Lord will receive glory whether or not he chooses to deliver us. Either way, he has delivered us from the evil of bowing to your idols!" That made their testimony even more powerful.

Once we face the full reality of our trial as these men did, a door opens for God to receive the glory that's his due.

Once we grieve, we can grow.

Peter writes, "In this *you rejoice*, though...you have been grieved by various trials" (*1 Peter 1:6, my emphasis*). Why would anyone rejoice in their grievous trial?

The Greek word Peter uses for "rejoice" here means "leap." It's the same word used twice in the book of Acts when crippled people were miraculously healed and began singing, dancing and leaping into the air. Peter is saying, "Amid your trials, you're able to jump for joy." He had good reason for saying it. He knew that Jesus is present with us in all of our trials, and the miraculous story of Daniel's three friends proves it.

"And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' He answered and said, 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods'" (*Daniel 3:23-25*). Most theologians agree that the fourth person in the fiery furnace was Jesus, present alongside the three unharmed men.

In our previous trials, we may not have recognized Christ was alongside us. Peter is telling us Jesus has always been there. To be able to recognize his nearness in our present situation builds a confidence we've never had before. We can say, "Lord, I know I can face anything because you're with me. No matter how this turns out, your hand is on my life. This is like a new faith."

That's what Peter means by the phrase, "the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold" (*1 Peter 1:7*). We no longer have a fearful, blind faith that says, "I *hope* Jesus will deliver me out of this," but one that says, "I know my Lord is good, no matter what he chooses for me, because he is beside me."

Peter himself lived in a world of great difficulty where persecution was always just around the corner. He had been jailed and beaten. Yet he lived with great faith because he knew that even in his greatest suffering, his Master was working glorious purposes through the circumstances of his life. He wants that for us, too. In the midst of our darkest hour, when life truly hurts, we have reason to rejoice: "Jesus with me always!"

Like Peter, Paul knew the Lord doesn't cause our trials but that through them we are blessed to see his incredible glory.

Paul's life was filled with trials like no one else's. He testified, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from

my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (*2 Corinthians 11:24-27*).

Paul knew that God could have delivered him from any of these trials. Despite his seemingly endless griefs, the apostle's mind was always on the people he served. "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (*11:28*). Paul's witness is beautiful to behold. Christ's assuring presence enabled him to endure every hardship, grief and difficulty for the sake of others.

Peter saw the same quality in the people he wrote to: "Though you have not seen [God], 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" (*1 Peter 1:8*).

The outcome of this kind of faith is a living witness to the world. When Nebuchadnezzar saw the miraculous deliverance that God performed for his three servants, the king cried, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside (my) command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way" (*Daniel 3:28-29*).

What a blessing our trials can be. As Peter says, they lead to "obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." In the end, our purified faith is "found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (*1 Peter 1:9, 7*). May it be so for you in your present trial. He is with you through it all to his great glory.

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