

In the Land of our Sojourn: A Tested Faith

1 Peter 1:6-9

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on July 20, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Last week I introduced our new sermon series through 1 Peter that we're calling "In the Land of our Sojourn". We talked about the similarities we share with Peter's original audience. These early Christians were called "*sojourners and exiles*" in relation to their culture. They were living and carrying out their discipleship to Christ in the land of their sojourn.
 - Likewise, churches today that seek to be faithful to Christ and the whole counsel of God are discovering how fitting the labels *sojourner* and *exile* have become. We are finding ourselves more and more on the outside of culture looking in. **What society believes to be plausible, what society judges to be good and righteous, is moving in a different direction than historic, biblical Christianity.**

- ❖ To the point that our Christian beliefs and values sound foreign and strange to the contemporary secular ear. When neighbors hear us speak about the miraculous – that seas once parted, that the sun stood still, that a donkey spoke, that a man survived in the belly of a fish, that a virgin gave birth, that a man walked on water, that this same man healed the sick and lame, that he died on a cross yet rose again three days later – they're incredulous. *You actually believe that?* That's just silly. **To your neighbors and colleagues, the truth claims of Christianity are no longer credible.** They're not intellectually plausible.
 - **And what's even more challenging is that the faith has become more culturally offensive.** People are offended by our insistence of absolutes – of an absolute moral standard by which everyone will be judged. By our exclusive claims of salvation – that there's only one name under heaven by which we are saved. By our views on marriage, sexuality, gender roles, and sexual ethics in general. Our beliefs sound antiquated, ignorant, and extremely intolerant. They seem out of place. They're alien to a pluralistic, secular society like ours.

- ❖ **I think, for many of us, we've been in the church for so long that we don't realize how crazy our beliefs and values sound to the non-Christian public.** I'm in that boat. I've spent so many years studying Christian theology and pastoring in churches that I can easily lose touch with the secular perspective on Christianity. But I was powerfully reminded of it the other day listening to talk radio as I drove home from a late-night meeting.
 - Have you ever listen to the radio broadcast called *Coast to Coast AM*? Turn on 740AM after midnight or after nine on weekends, and your first reaction is to think you're listening in on a practical joke. The host is engaging with callers who are claiming to have been abducted by aliens or have seen ghosts, or they're time travelers or the reincarnation of some famous dead person. You think he's messing with these callers, but then you realize the host is just as serious.

- ❖ These people actually believe this stuff. **Their conversation doesn't just sound alien. They're actually talking about aliens!** This week there was a segment on the Anunnaki, an extraterrestrial race that supposedly visited our planet thousands of years ago passing on advanced architectural knowledge to ancient civilizations. The Anunnaki are responsible for the Egyptian pyramids, the Greek Parthenon, the Mayan temples, etc.

- ❖ I'm listening to these guys and I'm thinking, "*Are you kidding me? You actually believe this stuff? You guys are crazy.*" And then I'm hit with the realization. **My non-Christian family and friends probably think I'm just as crazy when I talk about my Christian beliefs.**
 - When I speak of an ancient man who claimed to be God-in-the-flesh, when I talk about angelic visitors, evil spirits, and the dead rising from their graves – all with a straight face – I'm certain that my non-Christian neighbors are just as incredulous as I am when listening to *Coast to Coast*.

- ❖ But Peter essentially says in chapter 4:12 that we shouldn't be surprised to find ourselves as the object of the culture's scorn. To discover that we're the butt of their jokes. Don't be surprised. *Why would that be strange considering that we're strangers to society?*
 - Our response should be quite different. Peter goes on to say that "*if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.*" (4:14) That word *blessed* can also be translated as *happy*. **If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are happy.** You're joyful. Yes that sounds strange. Rejoicing when you're misunderstood and maligned? That seems very alien. And that is what we are.

- ❖ Here's the great thing: **As Christians, we've been called out of the world and set apart as aliens – not so that we can pull away from the culture and grip about its demise – but so that we can *engage* the culture and *surprise* the culture with a very alien and countercultural response to the insults and suffering.**
 - I want to show you three things in our text. Three surprising responses to these trials we face that I believe are more effective at commending the faith and its plausibility than any air-tight apologetic argument.

An Alien Reaction to Trials

- ❖ The first thing we see in v6 is an alien reaction to trials. Now before we read it again, let me remind you of the context. Peter is addressing this letter to the elect exiles of God whom God caused to be born again to a living hope, to an inheritance kept for us in heaven.
 - He says your new birth has resulted in citizenship in a new kingdom. You no longer belong to the kingdom of this world. As a Christian, your allegiance is to the kingdom of heaven and its King. **So it's no surprise that your new identity will result, to some degree, in alienation from the citizens of this earthly kingdom.**
 - Those of you with experience in being a resident alien (either here in the States or abroad) know what that feels like. When you're living as an alien in another land, you're bound to be misunderstood, to experience some degree of discrimination, to be disrespected and disregarded by the culture-at-large.

- ❖ Now to encourage his readers who are experiencing the same alienation, Peter promises in v5 that they are being guarded – by God's own power that sustains their own faith – for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. And then in v6 we read, "*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.*"

- ❖ Peter's point is that a Christian who understands his or her identity in Christ – as an elect exile, as one who has been born again to a living hope, as an heir of Christ destined to receive a great inheritance of salvation – will rejoice even though you are grieved by various trials in the land of your sojourn. You'll still count yourself blessed. You'll count it all joy.
- ❖ But here's where we have to be careful. **Because there's a popular idea among Christians – an unhealthy, unbiblical idea – that we shouldn't let suffering get to us.** You've got salvation. You've got the inheritance of heaven. So don't be glum. Don't let these trials get to you. Be happy in Jesus!
 - **But Peter expects his readers to be grieved by their trials.** Trials aren't good. You'll never find Scripture saying trials themselves are a cause for rejoicing. James said to rejoice *when* we face trials but never *for* the trials themselves (Jas. 1:2).
 - So if a Christian gets on the bad side of his supervisor because he's the only one on the team who refuses to fudge the numbers, that trial itself is not a good thing. If a believer is told that her views or her values are backwards and ignorant, that never feels good and should not be treated as good.
- ❖ So don't just grin and bear it. Don't pretend everything is great when you're going through a trial. Grieve, lament, feel and express your sorrow. **Peter understands that the trials you face as a resident alien to the world are going to bring you grief, but his point is that there is a kind of joy that can be experienced even *in your grief*.** And this is no lighthearted, superficial joy. No, Peter is talking about a deep-seated, deep-rooted joy that keeps you grounded and stable even when storms are raging out of control in your life.
 - There could be a category-5 hurricane raging on the surface of the Atlantic, but directly underneath, two miles down in the deep, deep bottom of the ocean – everything's calm. That's the kind of joy we're talking about. Surface-level joy will be blown away once the storm in your life gets big enough. But a deep-seated joy is sustained (and sustains you!) even when a storm is raging on the surface.
- ❖ *Now how is it that a Christian can have this kind of joy even in the face of trials? Its because we know two things about the nature of these trials.* Peter says they're temporary and they're intentional.
 - Notice how he says "*though now for a little while*" you've been grieved by these trials. So they're not forever. They're just for a little while. **These trials are temporary.** We have to keep it all in perspective – in eternal perspective.
 - Our future glory, our inheritance, is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (v4). That means it lasts for eternity. There is no end point to the joy that we'll experience in heaven.
- ❖ Now in light of that reality, consider the trials you face on earth. It doesn't matter how many there are or how intense they get. Every trial on earth has an end date. For the Christian, there is relief. Trials won't last forever, though they will now for a little while.

- That's how Paul could write the book of Philippians from a jail cell and still talk of joy and rejoicing. Telling us to rejoice in the Lord always (Phil. 4:4). Because he had that perspective. He knew prison terms have *terms*. They have end dates. But heaven doesn't. That's why he says elsewhere that, "*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*" (Rom. 8:18).
- ❖ Our trials and sufferings are temporary. **They're also intentional.** Notice back in v6 how Peter includes those two words "*if necessary*". Rejoice even though now for a little while, *if necessary*, you have been grieved by various trials.
 - That means trials are not the result of random chance or fate or karma. "*If necessary*" means those grief-inducing trials only come if there's a necessary purpose. Otherwise, they're not necessary. Now who gets to make that call?
 - This is another way in which Christianity stands out. In Christianity, it's not some impersonal force determining what's necessary. Rather, it is a wise, loving, heavenly Father making that call.

An Alien Hope to Gain from Trials

- ❖ *And what exactly is his purpose?* That question leads us to our next point. So the Christian's alien reaction to trials is joy. Now that's going to raise eyebrows and cause non-Christians to "*ask you for the reason for the hope that is in you.*" (3:15).
 - *What do you hope to gain from these trials?* The answer might surprise them. Let's consider our second point – our alien hope to gain from trials, which is tied up with God's purpose in determining that they're necessary in the first place.
- ❖ Peter tells us the purpose in v7. It starts with "*so that*". Why are trials necessary? "*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.*"
 - Peter is saying that God has designed trials to be a test of faith. **Trials are a crucible in which the genuineness of your faith is revealed.** If you come out on the other end of a trial still believing, then you will receive praise, glory, and honor when Jesus returns.
- ❖ He uses the analogy of refining gold. Gold was considered the most precious of metals in those days. There was no platinum around. Gold was the best. Now imagine you stumble across a fist-size, unrefined ore of gold and think you hit it rich. But just wait. Take it to a goldsmith first, and he'll put that ore of gold into a crucible and then he'll thrust it into a blazing hot furnace. And he'll let the fire do its work.
 - The flames will test that fist-size rock. Testing to see what's real, what's authentic. And after you pull it out, don't be surprised to find something much smaller than you put in. **The fire burned away the dross – all that was not gold was consumed.**
 - Yes, you may grieve for a little while that it's not the size of your fist anymore but that grief is only temporary. In the end, you rejoice because you know that what you *do* have in your hand is genuine gold. It's the real stuff.

- ❖ That's what trials do. They test the genuineness of our faith in Christ. **Trials and suffering, for the sake of the gospel, have a way of distinguishing true faith from false faith.**
 - Jesus taught the same thing in Mark 4 in the parable of the four soils. He compares some people to rocky soil where the seed immediately springs up, but when the sun comes up the plant is scorched and, without roots, it withers away (Mk. 4:5-6).
 - Later on Jesus explains to his disciples that the person who is like rocky soil is the person who, when he hears the gospel, immediately receives it with joy. But without roots, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the gospel, this person immediately falls away. His “faith” withers.

- ❖ Jesus' point is that it wasn't real faith. **A person of real faith would have endured through the tribulation.** He would not have withered. He would have persevered. Not because of his own resolve or fortitude. But because, as we saw in v5, God is personally guarding his people by preserving their faith. **We can persevere only because God preserves.**
 - So if God deems it necessary to put you through a trial, to test you by fire, – yes it's going to hurt and they'll be some grieving – but if you come out the other end still holding on to Jesus by faith, then rejoice and be glad in it! Because now you have greater assurance that you're in possession of genuine saving faith.

- ❖ That's the primary benefit that we hope to gain out of trials, but there's more. Jonathan Edwards, in his treatise on *Religious Affections*, starts off looking at this passage. **And he says that trials not only manifest the genuineness of real faith, trials also make real faith shine all the more brightly and lovely.**
 - He says faith, *“never appears so lovely, as when it is most oppressed: and the divine excellency of real Christianity is never exhibited with such advantage, as when under the greatest trials. Then it is that true faith appears much more precious than gold.”*

- ❖ 24-carat pure gold is a precious thing, but one day it will perish. Peter, in his second letter, speaks of that day of judgment where the heavens and earth will pass through fire (2 Pet. 3:7). The particular fires on that day will consume not just the dross but even precious gold itself.
 - Peter says gold will perish. But genuine faith will deliver you from the consuming fires on that very same day. Gold can't help you but faith can. For that reason, true faith is far more precious and valuable and lovely to behold.

- ❖ So trials burn away false faith, and they make the splendor of true faith shine all the more brightly. But there's one more benefit. **Edwards says that trials have a way of purifying and increasing true faith.** They refine your faith, making it purer and stronger.
 - Faith needs stress-testing. It needs to be purified. Our sinful tendencies towards self-reliance and the remnants of unbelief in our hearts need to be burned away. And in his wisdom and goodness, God designed trials for that very purpose.

- ❖ Again, that's why James says, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”* (Jas. 1:2-3)

- Paul says the same thing in Romans when he writes, “*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*” (Rom. 5:3-4)
 - Again, we don’t don’t celebrate the suffering. We grieve it. But we do celebrate and rejoice in what it produces in us by the grace of God.

- ❖ So imagine if you’re that Christian worker who is now on your boss’s bad side because you refused to be a “team player”. A trial like that has a necessary purpose in God’s will. God is purposely bringing you into conflict – not just with your boss – but really with yourself. **Such trials have a way of exposing our own sin – exposing the idolatrous way in which we seek the approval of others or that idolatrous need we have for job security.**
 - If everything at work was peachy. If you never faced conflict, if you never went through a trial, if you never had your faith tested, your unhealthy dependence on the approval of others or your idolatrous need for job security would never be exposed.
 - **From God’s vantage point, the trials he sends are not meant to harm you but to help you.** They’re actually to your advantage.

- ❖ I know it doesn’t always seem that way. In Peter’s day, Roman farmers developed a tool for threshing wheat called a **tribulum**. They took a large, flat board of wood and hammered in flints of hard stone and bits of iron, which they hooked up to a mule or horse. Then they’d lay their un-threshed wheat in a big circle and have that animal go back and forth over the sheaves. That threshing sledge would grind over it real good breaking apart the sheaves and separating the grain from the husk. That’s how you use a tribulum.
 - **The interesting thing is that this ancient tool is where we get the word *tribulation*.** *When you’re going through tribulation, does it ever feel like you’re being threshed, like you’re under the crushing weight of a tribulum?*
 - Remember it’s not a punishment. It’s a tool. No farmer uses a tribulum just to harm the wheat. It’s not inflicting arbitrary pain. There’s a necessary purpose.

- ❖ **Friends, if God is putting you through trials and tribulation, you have a reason to still rejoice. Because ultimately you’re going to come away with purer faith, stronger faith, and a deep assurance that you have genuine faith.**
 - And there’s a reward for genuine faith. Peter says it will, “*result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” He says in chapter 5, “*when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*” (5:4; cf. Jas. 1:12)

- ❖ We need to remember this especially when we’re receiving our culture’s scorn, when secular society speaks ill of us and calls us strange. There’s such a temptation to be liked, to be accepted, to be complimented by others.
 - But as aliens in this land, we have to man up and take the insults, take the persecution, take whatever the culture throws at us – knowing that we’ll be accepted and complimented – not now – but on that final day by Someone whose opinion matters infinitely more.

An Alien Faith that Prevails over Trials

- ❖ Now on that final day, it says Jesus Christ will be revealed, unveiled, made visible. But in the present, we don't see him. In the present, we live by faith and not by sight. This leads to our third response to trials. It's holding on to an alien faith that prevails over trials.
- ❖ The default for those in world is to just focus on what's in front of them, what they can see. And if all they see are trials, all they feel is despair. **But a Christian is not dependent upon sight, and our emotions and reactions are not driven by what we see in front of us.** Even if all we can see are trials, we still have love. We still have joy.
 - Look at vv8-9, "⁸Though 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, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."
- ❖ Peter must have been amazed at the faith of his readers. They had never seen the historical Jesus. Neither have we. And yet we love Jesus. We find joy in Jesus even in the face of trials. Peter was amazed. His love for Jesus easily conjured up distinct images and memories.
 - He could picture Jesus touching the lepers, healing the lame, feeding the masses, washing his feet. Peter could see Jesus silent before his accusers, forgiving his enemies from the cross. And the next image is Jesus risen and alive, forgiving and restoring Peter himself on the shores of Galilee. Peter saw Jesus with his own two eyes. **That's why he's blown away that these believers love a Jesus they have never seen.** He is powerfully reminded that salvation is by faith and not by sight. "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" (Jn. 20:29)
- ❖ This is how you know if you're really a Christian. **When you suffer trials you're not in despair like the rest of the world, but rather your life is characterized by a living hope in Jesus that fills you with love and joy, inexpressible joy, glory-filled joy.** This is what Edwards called "religious affections". Every real Christian has them. You have that deep-seated joy, that deep-rooted sense of blessedness.
 - So you have to ask yourself, "*Do you have that joy in your life? Is your life marked by this inexpressible, glory-filled joy?*" I'm not asking if you're happy all the day long. I'm not asking if you have a smile on your face. **True Christians grieve.**
 - **But true Christians also rejoice with joy.** Because we're obtaining the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. Yes trials will come. But trials will go. Yes you're an alien here. But it will not always be so. God is bringing your home here. Heaven is coming down to earth.
- ❖ Friends, if you can't identify with this kind of love for Jesus, this kind of joy in Jesus, if you feel perfectly at home here on earth, then you're not a Christian. You need the salvation of your soul. Turn to Jesus now. He stands ready to save you. That means he stands ready to set you apart as a stranger and sojourner, an alien and exile. So be ready to be the object of the world's scorn. But be overjoyed to be a special object of God's love and inexpressible joy.