

**How to Handle Suffering:
By Faith
1 Peter 1:3-9**

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One thing I have quit doing the last couple of years is cleaning gutters. Every time I mention it, Sandy immediately hires someone to do it and sends me the bill. Maybe she has heard me tell this story too many times. A certain husband was cleaning leaves off his roof when he slipped and fell. As he slid off the edge, he managed to grasp the gutter for dear life. Dangling there between the heavens above and earth below, the frightened homeowner cried out, "Can somebody up there help me?" Quick came the reply, "Have faith, turn loose!" Taking one look at the ground, the man looked again into the heavens and said, "Is there anybody else up there who could help me?"

Suffering happens. Sometimes it is explainable. Most often it is indescribable. Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours and mine. The real question of faith is not "Why do people suffer?" The real question is "How do we handle suffering?" And that is what this little letter of I Peter is all about. It was written to encourage Christians to hang on when life is hard and the pain is real. It has a message for us too. We handle suffering by faith.

OUR FAITH IS GROUNDED IN THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Peter 1:3-5).

Faith is more than wishful thinking. This time last week I had hopes that my favorite basketball team would make the Final Four. I expressed that hope at church. I lived into that hope as I sat on the edge of my chair watching them extend a hard fought game into two overtimes. But my wishes finally dissolved into defeat. My hope in life is built on something more than a basketball game. My hope is built on Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.

We believe not because of us, who we are, or what we have done. We believe because God has worked in us a new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has provided for us an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. On Christ the solid rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

Faith is grounded in One who is able to do more than we can ever imagine or think. I like to visit New York City. Down on 5th Avenue at the entrance of the RCA building, there is a gigantic statue of Atlas struggling and straining, holding the world on his shoulders. Across the street at St. Patrick's Cathedral, behind the high altar, there is a small statue of Jesus as a little boy holding the world in his hand with no effort at all.

When I am struggling and hurt, feeling the pain, and wondering about tomorrow and anxious as to what it may hold, I try to remember, He has the whole world, including everybody here, in His hands. That is faith and that is why even in pain we have great courage. Our faith is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

OUR FAITH IS REFINED BY THE FIRE.

“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 (I Peter 1:6-7).

It has been said that people are a lot like tea bags. You never know their real strength until you put them in hot water. Realism is idealism that has been through fire and gotten purified. Cynicism is idealism that has been through the fire and gotten burned. Every crisis has both danger and opportunity. It can make us or break us, refine us or destroy us. Life is determined by the way we handle the hot spots of our days.

George Whitfield supposedly prayed, “O God, put me into one furnace after another, that my soul may be transparent, so I can see God as he is.” I have not learned to pray like that yet. I keep praying that the hot spots will go away. But Whitfield understood that we are refined by the fire. You and I understand that even in the difficult moments of our lives there is a foundation that supports and strengthens us through all the days.

Perhaps the great hymn says it best:

When through fiery trials, thy pathways shall lie,
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

The refining process includes heating up and cooling down. The flames make us tender so we can bend without breaking, be shaped without shattering. And the cooling teaches us the fine art of waiting until we are strong enough to live into our new reason for being. May the Refiner's fire become our desire.

OUR FAITH FILLS US WITH INEXPRESSIBLE JOY!

“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” (I Peter 1:8).

It is joy, unspeakable and full of glory. The Greek term chara means “rejoicing with a joy that is beyond expression.” It is knowing that no trouble enjoys everlasting life. It is believing that this too shall pass. It is in all things giving thanks for the goodness of God. W.E. Sangster was one of Methodism’s finest preachers of the 20th century. Late in his life, Dr. Sangster suffered from muscular atrophy, a disease that gradually left him unable to speak and eventually unable to swallow. On the Easter before his death, Dr. Sangster wrote this to his daughter, “It is terrible to wake up Easter morning and have no voice to shout – He is risen! But it would still be more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout.” Chara is joy in the heart even when it cannot make it to our lips.

I was channel surfing the other night when I ran into an interview with Bethany Hamilton. Once ranked as the best amateur teen surfer in Hawaii, Bethany lost an arm to a tiger shark in 2003. But the accident did not dampen her compassion or competitive spirit. She is back surfing again and holding her own in the toughest of competition. Here is what Bethany said, “I’m looking forward to the future. I want to show the world that I still have a life, and that my life is filled with joy. I have an undying trust that God is taking care of me.” We handle our suffering by faith. So pray for faith until you have it. Live by faith because you need it. Rejoice in the faith that will see you through.

If you do not have faith to move mountains, maybe you do have faith to tackle a mole hill. So use what you have and let God give you what you need.