

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for October 28: Living by faith through trials

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Most people would like to believe that once a person becomes a Christian, life would (or at least should) become easier. Many times a well-meaning friend might tell a struggling believer to “just trust in God.” While this is good advice for anytime, it seems to rest on an assumption that if one only had enough faith, he or she would not be suffering or that a little more faith would instantly remove the struggle.

This, however, is contrary to what we are taught both in the Bible and the past 2,000 years of church history. Throughout history men and women of faith have faced tremendous suffering specifically because of their faith. In addition, Christians are not immune from the realities of illness, death, and violence which are part of living in this fallen world.

When difficulties come, believers and unbelievers often respond the same way. We seek to get out of the trial or away from the suffering as soon as possible. But the Bible also teaches believers the lesson God has for us most often is in the midst of the trial. Suffering is the most fertile ground for growing strong faith.

At the end of chapter 4, Peter returns to the issue of suffering and gives believers guidance concerning how we not only might respond in faith to trials, but also how we might grow in faith as we live through difficult times.

Expect trials to come (1 Peter 4:12)

The Bible is clear that believers should expect to face trials. In John 16:33, Jesus states directly that his followers will experience tribulation because of their faith. Believers live a lifestyle contrary to the world and it often is convicting for those living according to the pattern of the world.

Believers are strangers and pilgrims living behind enemy lines in this world (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). Believers should therefore expect to face opposition and difficulties and not be surprised when they come. This expectation enables us to avoid allowing trials to alter the way we live. It helps us to refuse to give in to complaining and fear. It helps us to resist the temptation to instantly seek a way out of the trouble in our own strength.

It is important to note that not all difficulties we face are tests of faith. Occasionally we may suffer due to our own disobedience and sin. In those cases, the suffering should drive us to confession and repentance. Yet even when we are truly seeking to follow Christ, we should expect to encounter difficulties and use them to strengthen our faith.

Rejoice in the trials that come (1 Peter 4:13-16)

The Christian life is full of paradox: To truly live, one must die; the greatest in the kingdom will be the servant to all; love your enemies. Here Peter points to another paradox in the way we are called to live—rejoice in suffering.

One of the ways believers most clearly can distinguish themselves from the world is to rejoice in the face of difficulties. For most people, however, the last thing on their mind when suffering occurs is rejoicing or glorifying God. Our natural instinct often is to become angry with God for allowing it to happen and to do all we can to remove it.

Peter reminds believers that, as in all circumstances, their first response to suffering should be to rejoice and glorify God. Why? Peter gives two answers to this question. First, in suffering for our faith, we know we are

identifying with Christ. As we share in his suffering, we experience true fellowship with him as his Spirit rests on us and flows through us. Second, we know one day all our suffering will be transformed when his glory is revealed (Matthew 5:11-12). As pilgrims in this world, our focus is toward the future when our faithfulness in all things including our trials will be rewarded.

Learn humility in the trials that come (1 Peter 4:17-19)

It is in the midst of suffering and trials that we often have the best opportunity to honestly assess our life. We are able to see the truth about the extent of our own strength and our dependence on a power beyond us. It is for this reason that God occasionally sends trials into our lives to refine our faith and teach us humility before God.

Many in the church prefer to see God's judgment as reserved for the sinful world, but Peter reminds us God's judgment begins with his people as he seeks to purify the church as the lighthouse pointing the world beyond the church to God. Learning humility, however, is not a one-time act as our old nature always is seeking to reclaim control of our lives. We continually need to allow the circumstances of life to teach us humility.

Notice in verse 19 that even though Peter is discussing God's judgment, he refers to God not as "Judge," but as the "faithful Creator." This may be a subtle reminder that while God must judge and send trials into the lives of believers, he is above all the Creator who faithfully loves his creation and desires to give them real life as they humbly commit their lives to him.