



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

A Reflection on Trials — and Perseverance

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While teaching a Bible school class on 1 Peter, I mentioned in passing that the problem of evil and suffering is the starting place for atheists' principal argument against God's existence. A class member responded, "Well, then, I'd say they don't have much of an argument."

I thought of that comment a few years later while reading concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel's *Night*. This passage is especially riveting:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (Wiesel 1960, 32).

I suspect Peter would have sympathized more with Wiesel than the student in my class. He had witnessed the brutality of crucifixion, and experienced cross-examination and threats from officials, followed by incarceration, flogging, and ostracism (cf. Acts 4–5, 12). He was writing to other believers who would endure much of the same. While his suffering did not consume his faith, he didn't treat trials as aberrations; he told them suffering would remain a feature of their experience (1 Pet 1.6; 2.19–20; 3.14, 17; 4.1, 15, 19; 5.9–10). He also taught them how to re-

spond to it in light of the deliverance Christ has provided, pointing to Jesus himself as the best example of perseverance (1.11; 2.21–23; 3.18; 4.1, 13; 5.1). He began that instruction in the early words of his letter.

You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1.5–7).

Trials Happen

Most are aware that trials are part of life, the lot of both the righteous and unrighteous (Matt 5.45), but we've occasionally met some whose ability to cope with a crisis was apparently complicated by surprise that such could happen to *them*. Why that might happen is not especially difficult to discern. We might sing, "Living below in this old sinful world, Hardly a comfort can afford" (Coats 1940, # 745), but in truth most of us are pretty comfortable. We enjoy prosperity, utilize technological advances, and benefit from medical care most in history would never have imagined. As Peter Kreeft correctly observed near the end of the 20th century,

People hurt less physically in this century, especially this generation, than ever before, largely due to the progress of medicine. There are anaesthetics, one of the greatest inventions of all time. There are cures for more and more diseases. Industrial society gives most people a comfortable life, a life only a wealthy few used to have. Most people go through seventy or eighty years with less than half a dozen occasions of really agonizing, unendurable pain. A hundred years ago you were lucky to get through a single year without pain that we today would call terrible. Think of a world without anaesthetics. Think. When was the last time you felt the equivalent of a sword through your arm? (Kreeft 1986, 11).

In a world where so much goes well, pain that feels like a sword through the arm, horror from watching children's bodies turn into wreaths of smoke, ostracism, flogging, and incarceration because of faith, or even difficulties that just interrupt our lives can catch us off guard. But the words in 1 Peter 1.6–7—like those in James 1.2–4, Romans 5.3–4, and Hebrews 10.32–34—remind us that trials will happen even as they prepare us for others yet to come. Peter was realistic; he had heard Jesus say the life of faith would not always be easy (Matt 10.34–39; Luke 9.23–27). But like his fellow writers, he also knew that suffering will only last "a short time" and will, if we allow it, strengthen us for something better.

Inspired to Persevere

Peter urges his readers to meet trouble with a positive outlook that doesn't ignore the reality or severity of suffering, but understands that trials are opportunities for growing stronger. In light of the new birth, living hope, and salvation to be revealed (1 Pet 1.3–5), he says our "grievings" (literal translation of the plural participle *λυπηθέντας*, *lypēthentas*) are occasions for rejoicing because they refine our character (*δοκίμιον*, *dokimion*), just as fire purifies gold (1 Pet 1.6–7).

To enhance the encouragement we gain from Peter's assurance, we can recall examples of character-proving perseverance. We remember martyrs like Polycarp, who replied to the magistrate's

offer to spare his life if he would swear the oath to Caesar and revile Christ by saying, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (*Mart. Pol.* 9.3). We recall the words of Dr. Paul Brand, who spent years trying to develop an artificial pain system for victims of diseases, like leprosy, that destroy the body’s pain sensors. After trying to perfect alternative warning systems to keep patients from further harming themselves, Brand concluded that no adequate replacement was possible, exclaiming, “Thank God for inventing pain! I don’t think He could have done a better job. It’s beautiful” (Yancey 1977, 23). We also think of comments of athletes who look back on months of hard practices and repetitive drills from the vantage point of a championship trophy, and say, “It was worth it!”

When we learn to apply their lessons to our trials, we reinforce Peter’s assurance that one of the gifts “of the *varied* grace of God” (4.10) is the strength we gain from experiencing the “*various* trials” that afflict us (1.6) (the Greek word in both verses is *ποικίλος*, *poikilos*). That doesn’t mean, of course, that our “adversary the devil [who] is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet 5.8) will stop trying to discourage us. He wants us to dwell on our failures and ignore the evidence of our growth; he remains committed to obscuring the truth that growing faith is a process, that great victories don’t happen instantly and are often made possible by applying what we learn from setbacks.

Remaining Focused in the Fog

On July 4, 1952, 34-year-old Florence Chadwick attempted to become the first woman to swim twenty-one miles across the Catalina Channel from Catalina Island to Palos Verde on the California coast. It was not her first such venture; English Channel crossings in 1950–51 and similar endurance feats preceded her Independence Day swim.

As she set out that day in the ice-cold ocean, the fog was so thick she could barely see the boats that accompanied her, present to support her and provide protection from the sharks. After swimming 15 hours and 55 minutes, she asked to be taken from the water. She was just half a mile from shore.

On September 20, 1952, she tried again. The fog was just as dense that day, but after 13 hours, 47 minutes, and 55 seconds, she arrived on the California coast. She broke a 27-year-old record by more than two hours, and became the first woman to complete the swim. She would repeat it twice more (Islapedia 2022).

When, after her aborted attempt in July, Chadwick learned how close she had come to success, she said that, while not making excuses, had she known how close she was, she might have made it. What defeated her was not the numbing cold, the sharks, or lack of will. It was the fog that obscured her destination (Green 1989, 166). On her second attempt, she retained a mental image of the shore (Wikipedia 2026).

As we face our trials, Peter would have us retain the better image of “praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Christ” (1 Pet 1.7).

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An Additional Thought

"We might learn from Peter an important lesson regarding the theological task.... Challenges to the church from the outside provide the occasion for solidifying the church's internal identity, tracing its roots in the ancient purpose of God, drawing out the continuity from Israel of old to the contemporary life of God's people, and remembering that the primary orientation of faithful life is toward the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

~ Joel B. Green. 2007. *1 Peter*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 32

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