

**“Hardship & Glory”  
Greetings from 2020  
Downtown & Lexington  
July 12, 2020**

Imagine with me, a hypothetical scenario. **A year starts off, and half of Australia is on fire.** It seems like that may be a big story for the year. Then a much-beloved basketball player dies in a helicopter crash, **and some think: man, can this year get any worse?**

And then, hypothetically, **a few months into this year let’s say a global pandemic breaks out. Like something from a bad Netflix movie.** It has a weird name, and **no one really knows how it operates yet** or what impact it will have. At first, most everyone is like, *“We’ve seen this scare before, it won’t be that bad...”* But then flight restrictions turn into nationwide stay-at-home orders. **An unknown virus spreads like gangrene all over the world, killing large numbers of people.**

**Economies worldwide are completely shut down and crippled,** with unemployment numbers skyrocketing to worse-than-Depression levels. There are tons of new vocabulary words people have never heard of but that are now everywhere: **social distancing, flatten the curve, PPE, community spread, super spreader, N95...the list goes on.**

In this completely pretend year, **it is found out that the virus disproportionately affects the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.** It targets the weak and the vulnerable, and also has a disproportionate effect on African Americans, **because of historical healthcare disparities.**

**There’s a heated public debate over what to do about this,** and how we can protect some of the most vulnerable in our society. **On one extreme are those who argue we have to shut down everything until we have a vaccine** and if we don’t we’re grandma-killers, and on the other extreme are **those that say this is not even a bad flu and we should just proceed as normal** and let the chips fall where they may.

**I forgot to mention one thing:** this hypothetical country plagued by a worldwide virus that hunts the old and vulnerable **is led by someone in the demographic it targets most,** who will face off with **another man in the demographic it targets most...in an election year** where **political chaos, animosity, and polarization** is already at a fever pitch.

**For months life itself feels canceled. Schools, churches, movie theaters, restaurants are shuttered.** We adapt as necessary, and we all get **something called Zoom fatigue**--something we didn’t know existed. **We are told we shouldn’t wear masks, and then that we should.** Grocery stores become apocalyptic scenes with one-way aisles, **and if you hear someone cough everyone turns toward that person like they are a terrorist.** In the midst of all this, some still act like **Costco forcing customers to wear a mask might be the worst injustice they’ve ever seen...**

And then, hypothetically, **as a country starts trying to open up from a historic pandemic...a white police officer kneels on a black man’s neck** for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. It’s tragically ironic **because the form of protest for some against police brutality was in fact...kneeling.** And all of a sudden, there is a story and outcry so large that **you just might have forgotten for just a moment** that there is still a pandemic happening.

**Also, it's just July!** And this is not an exhaustive list...I didn't even mention many other things I could have, or the murder hornets, or the Saharan dust cloud...**not sure what happened with those.** I'll show you **one of my favorite memes that captures a bit** of how 2020 has felt:

**2020 has indeed felt almost apocalyptic. Like utter chaos.** Or a dumpster fire. Or whatever extreme phrase you'd choose. **Some of you have experienced some deeply personal pain** in the midst of all this. **Others of you haven't been as personally affected,** but there's still this jarring sense of disorientation. So much of this is just so...not normal. **The cumulative effects of this year have been enormous, regardless of the particular personal impacts you've had.** This year has felt like one of those topsy turvy rides at the fair that you couldn't pay me to get on. Just enormously disorienting.

**Because of the historic and unique nature** of so much that has happened this year, **we wanted to hit the pause button for a few weeks** and directly address some of the chaos. The goal of this series is to help us step back from everything swirling around us **and think about how we are to respond to all this chaos as the people of God.**

This is a bit different from our normal, **because most of the time we are simply trying to equip you all, the saints as Ephesians 4 says,** for the work of ministry from the Scriptures. We believe, biblically speaking, that is our job. **There are big news stories, contentious topics, and hot button issues in the news all the time.** We live in a turbulent, divisive, whipped-up culture. We know about more things that happen in the world **than any other humans who've already lived.**

**As a default, we try to resist being reactive to that part of our culture.** It becomes chaos if you do, where every few months you're stopping to address whatever is all over the news.

**In general, we default to a slight rebellion against that.** We want to subtly communicate that we have an eternal focus and mission that is *\*above\** the fray. We want to equip our people in ways where we're **not just reactive, but intentionally formed to wisely handle all of the fray.** To operate as Christians first and foremost, not as frustrated Americans or partisan ideologues.

**But occasionally, things happen that are so big, so deafening,** and we see potential for such confusion that we step back and say, "We need to speak directly and clearly to this." **2020 has felt like one of those things,** where we feel it helpful to step in and try our best to help us think as Christians through all of this.

**So go ahead and open up to the book of 1 Peter.** As we begin this series, I want to draw our attention here because this letter was **written to a church who was also facing very difficult, very disorienting circumstances.** We'll pick up in chapter 1, verse 1 to get the context.

### **1 Peter 1:1-3**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

In verse 1 we learned that this letter was written to Christians in the Dispersion. **The Dispersion was exactly what it sounds like, where Christians were dispersed** to all these different places--many times as a result of persecution for their faith. **Many early Christians were on the run from the sword**, telling people about Jesus as they landed in new places like Galatia and Asia.

I'll quickly point out **that we also have been dispersed, though by a virus and not by persecution**. And much of the time they worshipped in their homes, just as we are right now.

**And in verse 2, Peter gives us a major theme for the whole book.** The people he was writing to were undergoing significant suffering, persecution, and trials--which are referenced throughout. And over and over again, **Peter is going to point to “sanctification of the Spirit” and “obedience to Jesus”** in the midst of that suffering and those trials.

Through the rest of the letter, **he continues to teach on the hardships they are facing, and I think “hardship” is a helpful term for us.** Because we don't use the word “trials” much, and the word “suffering” tends to make us **think of someone dying or getting cancer or something**. But much of what Peter addresses here **just falls under the category of things that are difficult** to go through. They are hardships. **And he continues to remind them, “Hey--the Spirit is using this suffering or hardship to sanctify you. This is putting your obedience to Jesus to the test--don't forsake Him. Hold onto Him.”**

**While our situation is very different in some ways**, it's also very similar in others. I'm not saying this year has been devastating for everyone. **Some of you may feel annoyance more strongly than anything else**, and feel relatively unaffected. **But for all of us, this year has brought about significant, life-altering changes that we will never forget.** Even if they haven't been overwhelmingly hard, they've at least been jarring.

**And for many, it has been a whirlwind of suffering and hardship and difficulty.** Whether that's through the grief of losing a loved one, job loss, loneliness, economic uncertainty, the effects of racism you've experienced, relational breakdown, stress, or whatever it may be. **And add onto that--all of the normal suffering of ordinary life is still happening** in the midst of this.

**USA Today released an article recently that claimed the next pandemic coming** is the pandemic of mental health that will result from all this chaos. It referenced a report from The American Psychological Association **that 80% of Americans said the future of our country was a significant source of stress for them.** Another study concluded that **Americans are as unhappy as they have been in 50 years**, and another said that **the number of people reporting serious signs of psychological distress is 3 times higher** than it was 2 years ago.

**Anecdotally, I've also been completely taken aback** at some of the effects I've seen. I've borne witness to more jarring relational breakdowns and blow-ups in the past few months than I have in years. I think **all of this stress and separation from each other is doing a number on us**, and we may not even realize it.

**So Peter calls our attention to the same place.** *“Hey, the Spirit wants to use all this craziness and hardship to sanctify you. To grow you. Will you let Him? Hey, your obedience to Jesus is being tested through all of this. Are you still a Christian when you don't have the supports you normally have? Are you following Jesus through the chaos?”*

**He keeps pounding this drum as he moves through the letter.** Let's look at what he says next.

**1 Peter 1:3-4**

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,

**That's good news for all the uncertainty we've seen.** We have something to look forward to that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, and kept in heaven. **Something that can't be threatened by anything that happens here.**

**1 Peter 1:5-7**

Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 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.

**He tells them, suffering and trials are like a refining fire.** Just the way gold and precious metals are refined by fire, to burn away all the impurities, **hardship does the same for us.** It tells the truth about what we are really made of, **and helps burn away all the chafe,** all the immaturity and weakness to hopefully reveal “the tested genuineness of your faith.”

**When the heat gets turned up, it tells you the truth about who you are.** It tells you what is solid and real about your faith in Jesus, and what melts away.

**This drives our teaching to a great degree.** We want to equip our church so that when the day comes when the heat turns up, we're ready for it. **There is actually a ministry book called *The Trellis & the Vine* written in 2000 that ends with a hypothetical example,** I kid you not, that said: what if a pandemic struck your area, and your church was only allowed to meet in groups of three. What would happen, and would your church survive?

So when all this went down, there was **a bit of a realization for us: well, we'll see what we've built.** What kind of culture we have. **We've always strived to create a culture where we are the church--we don't go to church.** And we've been really encouraged to see all the creative ways our churches have managed all the change. **Our groups have trucked right along through this for the most part,** and that is not always common in the church world.

But there are many other applications here. **The trial of 2020 has probably revealed to many of us what our personal spiritual health looks like.** What has happened to your faith in Jesus and your pursuit of Him? **Have you been marked by the fruit of the Spirit in this season--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control?** What has happened to your spiritual disciplines and habits in all the disarray? **How have you done with engaging your community through this?** Have you let distance lead to assumptions and resentments in your relationships?

**What have you been revealed to be in some of the controversial aspects of this year?** Is your thinking about big things that happen saturated with a Christ-centered worldview, **or just a parrot of your favorite news source?**

**Think about all the chaos and difficulty of this year, and put it in the category Peter is giving us here.** Hardship points us toward sanctification in the Spirit, and obedience to Christ. We are going through the fire, and just like with gold, **the goal is that we come out purified and shining and radiant, with increased quality and substance.**

Peter picks the theme up again in chapter 4.

**1 Peter 4:12**

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.

This is a bold statement. **He's talking to people who, by any standard, have gone through some hard things.** Some of them have had their lives threatened or put on the line. These people are not just going through run-of-the-mill trials--**these are "fiery trials."** **Hot heat.** But still, he says *"Do not be surprised, beloved, as though something strange were happening to you."*

**It's a far nicer and more pastoral way of saying, "Honey, you aren't special."** In chapter 5 he'll add to this and tell them, *"your brothers around the world are experiencing the same things."*

**The Bible, over and over again, tells us to expect suffering.** It's not a question of if it's coming, but when and how much and how severe. **Suffering and hardship are not strange to the Bible. They are normative.** They are not evidence that God doesn't love you--they are exactly what He tells us to expect in a fallen world.

Though we are told to expect them, **this doesn't mean they aren't tragic at times, and terribly difficult** to go through. **The Bible has all sorts of room for lament and grief and sadness and pain.** There is so much real pain happening in the lives of our church, and what Peter is teaching **does not in any way diminish or glance over that.** As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, there is a time for everything--**including a time to sit in your pain and grief, and weep over the sadness of it all.**

Even Peter's analogy of fiery trials and gold being refined by fire tells us: **going through the fire is \*painful\*.** It hurts. It's enormously difficult. **The shine and purification does come--but it doesn't downplay the difficulty.** Being refined by hardship is incredibly painful. I can tell you from personal experience **that it hurts deeply and unmistakably.**

And next, **Peter is about to give them a truth I want to go in on for the rest of our time,** because it completes the picture he's painting.

**1 Peter 4:13a**

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings

Stop right there before we keep moving, because this is huge. **What this means is that as a Christian, when you suffer or go through hardship...you are in an actual and meaningful way entering into and sharing the sufferings of Christ.**

**You never suffer first. And you never suffer alone.**

**This is not some trite coffee mug platitude**, but a deeply profound spiritual truth that we can hardly grasp. It's not even just "He is with us," in a detached way when we suffer, but that there is a real, spiritual union with Him in His suffering. Our suffering and trials and hardship joins us to Him in His, we **participate in Christ's sufferings**.

Now, we love to compare suffering--which is almost never helpful, but that's for another day. **So you may be thinking that Jesus didn't live through a pandemic**, or some other particular form of hardship you've endured. **That would be a shortsighted belief**, because the reality is we could never understand the depths of Jesus' suffering.

We don't have the ability to comprehend **what it's like to be God confined to human flesh out of love for wayward image-bearers**. Our most painful experiences of betrayal don't compare to pouring your life into someone for years **only to have them betray you with a kiss and lead to your death**. Our fight against sin **doesn't compare to sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane**, only to submit to execution in faithfulness to the Father. **Our feelings of loneliness and desperation don't measure up to the spiritual agony** of eternal relationship being ripped and forsaken on the cross...as the most innocent person in human history **was brutally and wrongfully murdered, bearing our sins on His shoulders**--and even His resurrected body bears the marks of His torture.

When you suffer, you are only sharing. **When you go through the fire, you're not first, and you're not alone**. When you go through enormous hardships, you are graciously, thankfully, simply participating in His suffering. **You are joining yourself to Him through mutual heartache and hardship**.

With that said--**that's not all--**

#### **I Peter 4:13**

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, **that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed**. [emphasis added]

**The Greek word for glory here gives the picture of splendor, brightness, or majesty**. It's often applied to the sun, moon or stars, and it's **the stunning response of viewing something so extraordinary** you struggle to find words for it. (It's the same word used to refer to purified gold earlier.)

And what Peter is saying is **that the end result of all the hardship and suffering Jesus went through, was that His glory was revealed for all to see**. He rose in splendor and brightness, in supernatural, resurrected glory as the King of all Kings and the firstborn of the new creation, **shining as a radiant light over the cosmos**.

**Hardship is the path to glory**. This is the narrative arc of Jesus. **The cross comes first, the resurrection glory second**. Suffering is the way glory is achieved.

So Peter looks through his letter **to these poor, hard-pressed people sitting around their living rooms, and he says: "Don't worry--this is the path you are on too. You will share in His sufferings, yes--but you'll also share in his glory. You are with Him. Just as you rejoiced and were glad when His glory was revealed, you will do the same when yours is revealed. You are in the fire right now, but you will be amazed at what comes out."**

**I don't know if you've ever had the pleasure of interacting with a really mature Christian** who has walked a tremendously difficult path, but if so you've gotten a glimpse of this. Or maybe through reading about the life of someone like Corrie Ten Boom, or Joni Earekson Tada, or Dietrich Bonhoffer--where you see the purity of someone's faith and trust in Jesus, and it almost makes you speechless.

**My wife and I recently watched the Terrence Malick film *A Hidden Life***, a true story about a Christian soldier from Austria who refused to offer allegiance to Hitler's army. **His faithfulness to God led to gut-wrenching trials for him and his family, and as the movie ended**, I was crying and literally speechless. I was so emotionally overtaken by the glory I saw through his faithfulness that I couldn't form words. Those moments of awe or speechlessness are just glimpses into glory.

**What Peter is teaching here is that God wants you to be glorious!** He wants you to share in the glory of His own Son. He wants your soul to be shaped and formed into the radiant, splendor-filled image of Jesus. **He wants your faith and trust in Him to be so solid that it could make others speechless.** He wants all the impurities and chafe of your sin to be melted away, **leaving only pristine gold shining for all to see.** But in the story of Jesus, there is only one way that happens...

**Suffering is the path to growth.**

Death is the path to life.

**Fire is the path to purity.**

Hardship is the path to glory.

**The radiant good only comes through the really, really hard.**

Because of this, **we can, and in fact are instructed to**, *"rejoice insofar as you share in the sufferings of Christ."* That's a statement that only a Christian can say. **As an American, what possible reason would you have to rejoice in the midst of all this?** But as a Christian, you can look at all of the chaos and difficulty, and then look at yourself, and the other Christians around you--and you can know.

**You are dispersed, hard-pressed, tired, afraid, anxious, depressed, annoyed, lonely, fill in your blank.** You are entering into--sharing, the sufferings of Christ. So that you, and us, can be sanctified. Refined by fire. **So that we all can share the glory and wholeness and radiance of Christ.**

Before his final departing words, **Peter ends the letter to this dispersed and hurting church with some reassuring words.**

**I Peter 5:6-7, 10-11**

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

After you have suffered a little while. **In other words, this won't last forever.** The God of all grace, who is gracious even in the hard, has called you to his eternal glory in Christ. **That is His end for you.** The way to that glory is hardship, **but it won't last forever.**

After a little while, He will, Himself--**restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.**

He will restore what's missing, confirm what is questioning, strengthen what is floundering, and establish what is wavering. He will not let you go--**He will accomplish the purposes He set out to bring about in you.**

So let all of this frame up the various challenges brought by this crazy year. Let this be the framework for the topics we wade into in the coming weeks. **Hardship is the path to glory.**

**God set out to sanctify us, to deepen our obedience to Jesus.** He wants us to be glorious and solid and full of splendor that comes only from Him. **And He does this deep work through suffering and hardship,** because that's the way it works in His Kingdom.

**If hardship is the path to glory, then 2020 must have a lot of glory in store for us.** So let's walk through this fire together and let it purify us. Let's let it grow us and expose the areas we need to repent. **We will either be more separated and scattered and sinful after all this, or more unified and purified and radiant.**

**Let's pray for 2020 be the year that brought our church together even while we were apart.** That it would ground our faith and trust in Jesus like no other year on record, so we can respond to chaos and fear and uncertainty and division and injustice as the maturing and refined people of God, walking with Him through hardship on the way to share His glory.

**Pray.**