

1 Peter 1:1-12
Nothing By Accident
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6-29-14

If you were to take a look back on your life story, would you see moments that you'd prefer to be left on the editing room floor? Not necessarily those foot-in-mouth moments; I'm talking about those experiences of adversity and struggle we all face.

Or to put it in a different light, imagine that you had the opportunity to rewrite the story of your child's life and you looked back at the struggle they faced in elementary school because you later learned that they had a learning disability. Or that time in high school when they were a member of the cross country team, only to have one of their close friends be diagnosed with terminal cancer. Or who after 10 years of what seemed to be a very normal and happy marriage, all of a sudden face a spouse who unexpectedly files for divorce, and has no way to stop it.

If this was the story you faced in your family and you had the chance to edit the past, to rewrite history, what would you do? Would it be right to remove those things? Would God be a good God if he were able to erase those bad experiences?

Psychologists Robert Sternberg and Jonathan Haidt both state that personal stress and the right amount of trauma at the right time in our lives can actually make us more compassionate people and enable us to have a greater level of empathy toward others.

Why do I ask these questions, especially since they're pretty raw and exposing? Because I believe that every single one of us here in this room has some sort of wound, some pain in their lives that is causing them to hurt. And that without the interceding mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, who himself is—as Henri Nouwen says—the wounded healer, healing from his own place of brokenness by sharing our wounds. Without Jesus Christ I believe what we can hope for is self-administered healing at best, and at worst running or hiding from our struggles, or simply to medicate them away.

What do you do with that yearning? What do you do with that hurt? Do you run from it? Or do you face it? Because Jesus Christ is inviting you to so much more, he is inviting you to not only see the hurt, but to see the healing and restoration that has already happened and is available to you now through his grace and mercy.

So I want to invite you to look with me today at a collection of very short letters in the New Testament. They are called the Catholic or General Epistles. One of the themes that bubbles up in every one is that we will face trouble, that life at times will be difficult and there will be adversity in one form or another. And so no matter what letter you read, Peter or James or John, each one of them endeavors to offer words of encouragement for those who face adversity.

Do you know anything about experiencing adversity? Then these letters are for you.

I invite you to stand with me as you are able and turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. If you are following along in one of the copies of Scripture we've made available to you in the pew rack, it can be found on page 212 of the New Testament. When I'm done I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God." Listen carefully we're reading God's Holy Word.

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.

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, 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. Though 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, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Peter begins his letter by addressing the believers scattered throughout Galatia, Pontus, and Cappadocia who, at the hands of Emperor Nero, had begun to experience tremendous persecution for their faith. In fact, as the Roman historian Tacitus, in one of the earliest mentions of Christians anywhere, says that there was a group called "Chrestians" who followed a man named Chrestus—they didn't even really know what to call them—this man was crucified under the jurisdiction of a local Roman leader called Pontius Pilate. In 64 AD, when the Great Fire of Rome destroyed the city, Nero—who it is widely believed started the fires himself—made these new Christians the scapegoat for his plot to destroy and rebuild Rome. Throughout the region, Christians, Jew and Gentile, were being systematically persecuted for their faith.

So Peter begins this letter by reminding them: "Listen, remember who you are, remember what Jesus did, and remember whose you are." Sounds simplistic I know, but this really

is a fundamental lesson. In the face of adversity, it is possible for us to forget who we are and revert to old ways of thinking, rather than standing on the truth of what makes us who we are. So Peter says to them, “Remember that not only is Jesus at work in you now, but he has already gone before you to prepare a place for you, a reward in heaven set aside for those who stand firm in me. The truth of what has already taken place in the Cross of Christ will never parish, and is awaiting the time when it will be revealed to you, so don’t forge what is already true about you.”

What do the Apostle Paul and former major league baseball player Chuck Knobloch have in common? How’s that for a segue?

In the mid 90s, the Yankees had a second baseman named Chuck Knobloch, who, after having a very successful career to this point, a career that included a World Series ring with my Minnesota Twins, all of a sudden had a hard time throwing the ball to first base. In baseball and golf, the scientific term for this is the yips; I know because the very same thing happened to me in college. What was an easy throw that he had made thousands of times all of a sudden became the scariest thing in the world. All he saw was the inescapable pressure of his surroundings, and it caused him to choke under pressure time after time. It got so bad it actually cut his career short.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers*, there he describes what happens when a person chokes under pressure. Under tremendous amounts of pressure, he says, people who have learned to do something that has become so second nature that they don’t even think about it, will all of a sudden begin to over think, and in doing so they revert back to the time in their lives when they were first beginning to learn a skill. Chuck Knobloch was having such a hard time, not because he wasn’t thinking about each throw; it’s that he was thinking too much.

In the face of adversity, Peter’s audience needed to be reminded that adversity comes with the territory. God never promised his people that when you get with God, life would all of a sudden be a cakewalk. Quite the opposite. Jesus told his disciples in John 16:33, **“Listen in this life you will face troubles, but take heart because I have overcome the world.”**

In the midst of our adversity, what God is telling us is, “Let me take you back to the basics, let me remind you time and again of the basis of your faith, that in doing so you will be strengthened.” God is telling the people, “Listen, hang in there, I got this, don’t give up.” Even though it’s hard right now, and none of us is expected to find joy in the midst of suffering, Peter reminds them joy comes when our suffering is given meaning and we see the future fulfillment, the purpose of it all. What you’re facing now, Jesus is using to shape you and form you into the person he made you to be.

And this is the second thing that Peter aims to teach his reader in this text: when you are in the midst of a trial, don’t run from it, don’t hide from it. It’s possible that the adversity could have long-term value in our development. Look at verses 6-7: **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.

A few months ago, my son Christian had a very rough afternoon, around dinner-time became very ill, unable to keep food or drink down. We were very worried. And fearing that he was becoming dehydrated, we took him to the Emergency Room. In order for him to get the precious fluids he needed, there was a needle that came first. Now being a young child, when he saw the needle all he saw was, “Ouch, that hurts.” He was unable to see that once the needle was inserted immediately, he began to feel better.

Now even though needles still scare him a bit, he has a growing understanding that the initial pain of a needle can bring healing. Peter lauds his readers, “Don’t run from the adversities of life, but meet them head on. In facing them, your faith will become more valuable to you than gold. Not only that but like gold, being refined by the fire, you will grow in purity and strength.”

Somehow, as we stand by Jesus Christ in the midst of our struggles in life, we grow in our capacity, we’re developing into the people he’s made us to be. If we were going to put this into a mathematic equation it would look like this: friction + faith = formation. God uses the friction in our lives (notice I didn’t say he caused it, but he’s using it); he’s redeeming it to make you a better person.

I want to introduce you to a young man who has been in our lives for the last 8 months. Salone is a 15-year-old boy whose parents are both addicted to drugs. And so as a result, he has time and again run from home. His running brought him to White’s. There, he was faced with the pain of an utterly broken home life, and the realization that his biological parents cared very little for him.

But at White’s, he found acceptance. At White’s, he found purpose—Salone was the sound technician in the chapel. Now that didn’t mean that he didn’t still wrestle with the hurt of his past. Many times, it got the better of him, and he chose to run from White’s. But each time he was brought back, he dug in a little more deeply into what God was doing in his life, each time believing a little more that his life had purpose, and as the amazing and talented chaplain there would say to the students every chapel, “Maybe you’re not at White’s by accident, maybe you’re here for a purpose. And maybe that purpose is to meet the living and redemptive God, who wants to give you the strength and purpose and grace to live new lives.”

Salone heard that every week for the last 8 months and just this last Wednesday, Salone went home to a foster parent. A wonderful Christian man and woman whose children are grown and who have more love to lavish upon kids, who have more grace to offer kids, because they too in their own life endured the trials and setbacks, and in doing so were refined into pure gold with a faith that was as tested and true as anything. So that now what was left in them, and what can be left in us is the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Every one of us is writing a story of our lives. And what Jesus offers us through the hope and promise secured in his resurrection is that if you endure with him, he will offer the most beautiful and powerful and profound meaning to you in the midst of it. Jesus invites us to allow him into the middle of our story, into the suffering, into the adversity, into the struggles we all face, so that in doing so he might rewrite the conclusion of our story. His life becomes our life, his grace becomes our grace, and his peace our peace, his purpose our purpose, and his dwelling place our dwelling place. With God and Spirit, now and forever. Amen.