

1 Peter 1:3-9

Sermon transcript by Pastor Dan Hollis

On its face the central point of this passage seems to be that the trials we face test the strength of our faith.

Now it's easy to infer some kind of cause-and-effect from words like that. We've heard people say, and sometimes we've said it to ourselves, that when we are struggling or suffering through trials, that God is testing us.

In context it sounds like God tests our faith by sending trials.

As a pastor and as someone who has seen a lot of people go through impossible trials and true suffering... I don't actually believe that.

I don't believe that God sends us suffering and struggle and tribulation to test how strong our faith is. You may think differently, and there's nothing wrong with that. Many make sense out of their suffering by trusting that this is a test, I will come out of this with a stronger faith.

I can't disagree with that outcome, I've seen it many times.

Where I differ, is that I don't believe that God says, "This person needs their faith to be tested. I will send a car to hit this person, or I will send cancer to their loved one, or I will send a virus to roam the Earth." That kind of God is not the God that I see revealed through the work and words of Jesus Christ.

That may be how some make meaning of the world, and it's certainly how many who lived in the centuries before Christ chose to

reconcile their trials with God. But that doesn't feel like the God that I've come to know.

See when we look at trials and suffering, and we look at God—something bigger than ourselves and beyond the limitations of this world—it feels like there are only 2 options:

Either God doesn't care that we suffer, and just lets us go on doing it and doesn't stop it... or God has sent that suffering to us to test us.

I don't like either. I believe there's a third option.

Now I don't know why suffering is a thing when we have an all-powerful God that loves us. I don't know why God hasn't erased the coronavirus, just like I don't know why God allowed the Holocaust, or climate change, or 9/11, or Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of Martin Luther King. I don't know why bad things happen.

But I still have faith that God exists... and my faith tells me, deep in my heart, that God does care, more than anything, even in our suffering. My faith allows me to trust God even though God doesn't magic the evils away.

But I have trouble believing in the idea of a God that sends those evils to us, especially to "test" us.

So I think back to 1 Peter and what it says:

"In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

I think about that idea—tested like gold is tested in fire—thing is: "testing" gold by fire isn't like biting into a gold piece to tell whether or not it's real. This process isn't so much a test as it is a refinement.

See, gold is placed into a container like a crucible, and it's heated to tremendous temperatures by fire, so that it melts down into liquid form. Then chemicals are added, and impurities are separated out, and the gold solidifies into something stronger and more valuable than it was to begin with.

I think we can go through the same kind of process when we are subjected to trials and even suffering. The difference is, where a blacksmith or a jeweler placed the gold into the crucible and the crucible into the fire to be transformed, and that's how the ancients related to God or reconciled God, I don't think that God put us in the fire at all. I don't think the metaphor carries through the same way there.

I don't know why we're in the fire, or why we must face it, but that's where we find ourselves at different points in our lives.

The "point" of God—which is a weird thing to say—is to be the chemicals that are put into the liquid gold.

We're here. We're hot. We're struggling through a trial, and God sees that. Through the witness of Christ we see that God knows our suffering intimately and feels our pain.

And God steps in.

But instead of just taking us out of the fire, (which, again... wouldn't it be nice?) God adds something to the mix.

The point is, we are not alone in our suffering. We do not face these trials alone. God's spirit fills us even in our struggles, and with God we can transform ourselves.

I believe the trials of our lives aren't tests God places upon us, but opportunities for us to work with God to transform ourselves into something stronger and better and... more beautiful.

God sees us in our trials and tries to make the most out of our situation. And we should too.

What I'm really saying is that we have the opportunity to wrestle as much good from this trial as we can--the universe owes us that much--and we should take it.

God is there, giving us the strength that we need to take it. Helping us to transform in this fire we find ourselves in. So that on the other side, when the fire dies down and the liquid metal of our souls cools... what we have become is stronger and more beautiful than what went in.

That's true for this pandemic, and it's true for all the trials that we face.

I would never wish suffering on another, and I would have a hard time worshipping a God who would... but God does not leave us alone in our suffering. God is working within us, and I urge each and every one of you to work with God too.

May your faith be as active as God, may your faith be as transformative as God, and may we all come through each of our trials refined.

Not because God wills it, but because God wants to help us do it.

Amen.