

Malady: Our sufferings and trials lead us into grief and despair.

Virtue: Our trials and sufferings refine us like fire, and prove the genuineness of our faith.

Cure: The inheritance Jesus won for us with his resurrection cannot be tarnished, even by suffering.

Propositional Statement: Trials and suffering will come in our lives, but they only serve to prove the value of our faith that guarantees our inheritance.

Purpose Statement: The purpose of my sermon is to encourage my hearers to view their sufferings as opportunities to display their faith.

Theme: Can I Be Fine With Being Refined?

1. Trials Can Bring Me Grief
2. Refined Faith Brings me Salvation

Have you ever had the chance to watch a sword being forged? It's always fascinating to see a craftsman at work, no matter what their medium is - carpentry, masonry, painting, sculpting...but for me, there's something different about swordsmiths. Maybe it's just a boyhood fascination with sharp things and fire. Or maybe it's the incredible effort that goes into each piece - not just hours upon hours of work but the actual blood, sweat, and tears that the craft demands. The mixture of brute force, searing heat, and careful precision is truly something to behold, and none of it is optional; fail at any stage, and the entire project is undone - every drop of blood and sweat wasted.

Quality steel is made, not born. It has to be purified with intense heat, and its impurities removed by folding and beating it with hammers. But if the smith takes his time, if he folds the steel with his hammer till his fingers blister and bleed, if he never flinches at every red-hot spark that singes his face, if he sharpens and polishes with care, then he can turn a few lumps of iron and charcoal, some wood, and scraps of leather into a valuable tool that can be passed down for generations. The end result is worth every bit of effort that it cost to produce.

And perhaps that's the most interesting thing of all about swordsmithing - it makes such a close parallel to what a Christian life is like. Just like quality steel, Christian faith is made, not born. But that means a refining process that isn't always easy - our faith is tested when we experience trials and difficulties in this life. Sometimes those hammer blows can bring us to our knees, and cause us to wonder whether God loves us at all. But it's through those trials that our faith is refined and purified, and it's through a refined faith that we receive something with value beyond compare - salvation.

What does it mean to have your faith tested? We don't have to look far to find an example - the Christian people Peter was writing to were going through some tough trials, which is why Peter wrote to them in the first place. The Christian church at the time had spread far and wide, reaching new souls with the power of the Gospel. But at the same time, this growth in popularity was causing a new problem - more exposure to the world meant more enemies for God's people. As the Church grew, opposition grew right along with it, and by the time Peter wrote his letter organized persecution, imprisonment, and even the execution of Christians was underway.

Persecution is a serious enough problem on its own, but there were other factors at work that turned it from a serious problem into a critical one: these were young Christians, new in their faith. Not to say that their faith was weak, but that it hadn't had much time to develop and mature, since they had only recently converted from their old lifestyles and habits. Adding to this problem was how physically far away from one another these groups of young Christians were. You can get a sense for how isolated they were when Peter describes them in the very first verse of his letter as "scattered!"

All of a sudden it seems like maybe we don't need to look quite so far as the Middle East for an example of faith being tested. We can't draw a direct comparison between the violent persecution against the early church and whatever persecution we experience today, and praise God for that! But as I look around at all these empty pews that used to be full of Christian people worshipping together,

it's not hard for me to imagine that you might know what it feels like to be "scattered." Even though technology allows us to communicate with each other in any place at any time, you might still be missing the feeling of being face-to-face with people who share your faith and your values.

Is there anything else testing your faith lately? It's difficult enough being separated from your church family, but what about from your relatives, your coworkers, or your friends? Longing to check in on your family, even when you can't, can fill us with anxiety and worry. Perhaps it's not separation that's weighing on you. Maybe bills are looming at the end of the month, but you just filed for unemployment. Or maybe you're one of many who are "at risk," and the thought of a virus one day knocking on your door chills you to the bone.

All of these worries and fears put pressure on our lives in every way - physically, mentally, and even spiritually. Stress takes its toll on our health and well-being. When we are overcome with doubts and fears, it can drive us into depression and despair, and from there it's only a short walk to begin asking hard questions. "How could God do this to me?" "A loving God wouldn't let bad things happen to good people." "Why does God want to punish me like this?"

And in those moments, whether we realize it or not, we're right where the devil wants us. He wants nothing so much as for us to doubt God - if you want evidence of this, look to the very first recorded words the devil speaks in the Bible! "Did God *really* say...?" he says, and plants the seeds of doubt in Eve's heart. When troubles and trials drive us into a despair that takes control of us, the devil knows that he can exploit our grief. He understands that we have a sinful nature in us that hates and mistrusts God, that wants us to think we can fix all of our problems without anyone's help. So when the devil points to God and blames Him for all of our troubles, our sinful nature goes right along with him, and he drives a wedge between us and God.

So what is the point of these trials, if the devil can twist them this way? Why *does* God allow hardship and struggle into my life, if he really loves me? It seems as though the only thing I can gain through these trials, if you could even call it that, is grief and pain. But through Peter, God reveals to us that behind these trials is a beautiful purpose; through trials, our faith is refined, and a refined faith brings us the salvation of our souls.

It's impossible to imagine having any kind of hope at all if things stayed the way they were. If our sinful natures had their way, we would still be following the devil, doubting and distrusting God, and walking willingly to our own destruction. But even though we doubted and denied him, God was merciful to this sinful world, and now through his Son Jesus we have hope. Not just any hope, but a *living* hope!

You see, that living hope didn't come for free. The devil had this world firmly in his grip, and only the most perfect sacrifice could break his hold. So Jesus offered himself as that sacrifice, living a perfect life in our place and dying for us on the cross, all to secure our freedom from sin. And we know that his sacrifice was not for nothing, because God raised him from the dead on Easter morning as proof of his absolute victory! Jesus lives, and that gives us living hope!

When God raised Jesus from the dead, it was more than a declaration of victory, it was a promise that we will also rise! And when we were baptized by water and the Word, we were reborn into a new life filled with that new, living hope. This hope is much more than wishful thinking, more than crossing our fingers and closing our eyes, this is a *sure* hope that is built on something that *lasts*. This hope is built on the resurrection of Jesus - he rose from the dead, and so will we.

Peter tells us that our new birth in Christ hasn't just given us hope, it's also made us into heirs with Christ, with an inheritance all our own. But this inheritance is like nothing we've ever seen! An earthly inheritance is made of earthly things, and so it won't last forever. A family heirloom might be passed down from one generation to the next, but even gold tarnishes and wears away eventually. This inheritance of an eternity in heaven with our Savior never tarnishes, never loses its luster, never fades away. When grandpa leaves you his favorite sweater, and stores it away in the attic, it can be

eaten by moths, get musty, or be lost. But the inheritance from Jesus is kept in heaven, where “no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” And this inheritance is being kept ready for you, right now, until the time comes for you to receive it!

But how do we receive this inheritance? And we still haven’t answered why God allows trials into our lives! The answer to both of these questions is one and the same: it’s faith. Through faith in Jesus, who makes us into God’s children at our baptism, we are made new in His image, able to live forever in His holy presence. This new person is able to live in a way that pleases God even while we’re here on earth. Yet even though we have this new life, Jesus doesn’t promise us that our earthly life will be easy. In fact, he tells us the opposite! He says that “in this life, you will have trouble.”

But these trials and troubles we face aren’t without a purpose; they serve as a way to temper and strengthen our faith. It’s in the middle of the worst times in their lives that Christians throughout history have found the opportunity to show the world the value of their faith. God’s power is made perfect in weakness - what better time to show the power of God than to put our trust in Him in our weakest moments? It’s through times of weakness that Peter tells us our faith is proved genuine. Like a prospector biting a nugget to test the purity of its gold, our life’s trials prove our faith to be pure and valuable - even more valuable than gold!

This is why, even in the middle of suffering, we can “be filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” because through that proven faith we have a living hope that can never be taken from us. When Jesus returns in glory to judge the world, the true value of that faith will be revealed - all the trials of this temporary life were worth it to receive the eternal inheritance of life with Jesus. Every trial we endure is an opportunity to show that refined faith!

It’s a tested, tempered, and refined faith that accomplishes God’s highest goal. A refined faith can walk by faith, and not by sight, and trust in a Jesus who sits out of view in heaven, even when He seems impossibly far away. A refined faith can withstand the attacks of the devil who seeks to tear a rift between God and His children, even when we are separated from our friends and family. It’s through a faith refined and proved genuine by hardship and struggle in the midst of sickness, financial trouble, or the loss of a loved one that leads us to heaven, and the salvation of our souls that has been God’s purpose for us since the creation of the world.

So what do you think? Are you fine with being refined? A good swordsmith knows that for a sword to do its job, its steel needs to be purified and tempered with lots of heat, force, and skill. But there is no craftsman as skilled as the Creator, and you are worth more to Him than any metal, even gold. With the hand of God behind us, life’s trials cannot destroy our precious faith, only refine it, so that we never lose the hope of our salvation. And He continues to guide our lives with His mighty hand, until Jesus returns to prove the genuineness of our faith, and take us to enjoy our priceless inheritance forever. Amen.