

*From Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God,
by Paul David Tripp (2004, Shepherd Press), pp. 193-201*

I want to direct you to a story summary that is form-fitted to our topic [suffering]. It is written to people who are suffering, and it is followed by a very practical set of directions that address the issues of midlife very well. The first Epistle of Peter is probably the Bible's clearest and most concentrated treatise on suffering, so it makes sense that it would start with a summary of God's story of redemption. When you are in the middle of the painful heat of difficulty, it is very hard to keep the big picture in view. It is very easy for your view of life to shrink to the size of the difficulty of the moment. When this happens you begin to live more for survival than with purpose. This often leads to decisions and actions that you later live to regret. So, after a brief greeting, Peter starts with the big picture.

Then-Then-Now

1 Peter 1:3-9 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

You won't understand all that Peter has to say suffering in the rest of his letter unless you understand this amazing story summary. It gives us the helicopter view that makes sense out of everything else Peter will say.

The structure of Peter's summary is quite typical of the summaries throughout the Bible. It is a "then-then-now" summary. Peter begins with the *then of the past*. Verse three summarizes everything God has done in redemptive history up to that point. Peter is saying, "Don't you see that from before the foundation of the earth God has been working on your new birth? From day one he has had a single focus: redemption." Think about what an amazing perspective this is on the Old Testament. When we, as the newborn children of God, read biblical history, we are not reading the dusty accounts of saints long gone. No, we are reading our own biography, because all of it was done with our new birth in mind. Peter wants us to look back through the lens of redemption. What does this mean? It means every situation, every judge and king, every moment of trial and victory, every battle, every prophet, every promise, and every provision was for us! Each was a critical piece of God's carefully planned and orchestrated redemptive plan. Each moment was a step toward the time when the Messiah would come and, by his life, death, and resurrection, purchase every moment of it. We are spiritually tied to each Old Testament saint. We are brothers and sisters in the same story, that great story of redemption. What a past!

Next Peter looks at the *then of the future*. In verses four and five Peter points us to something that is equally amazing as what we have just considered. Peter is saying, “Don’t you know that because of what Christ has done for you, your future is guaranteed?” He says that we have “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.” Think about what this means practically. You have a spiritual trust fund that no one can take away from you. They are locked safely away in God’s celestial vault. No one can take God’s love from you. No one can steal his forgiveness. No one can take his Holy Spirit from within you. No one can rob you of his strength or wisdom. No one can take away your justification or adoption. No one can plunder your place at his side for eternity. No one can pilfer your deliverance from the presence and power of sin. The real riches of life that you and I could never earn, which are only obtained as a gift, are never at risk.

They can take your job. They can take your house. They can damage your health. They can reject, oppress, and abuse you. They can rob your possessions and empty your bank account. They can rob you of friends and family. But the most essential and wonderful things in all of life are unassailable. No one can touch them. They are guaranteed. When those are the things you prize, when these are the things that really give shape and direction to your life, you can live with courage and hope. How’s that for a good investment?

But there is more! Notice what Peter says next, because it is simply astounding. He says that not only is our inheritance locked away and guaranteed, but we are daily “shielded by God’s power” so that when it is time to receive our inheritance, we will be there to receive it. Let me illustrate what this means. Imagine you put your life savings in a local bank, and the bank officer gives you a contract guaranteeing that nothing will ever touch your investment. But imagine further with me that he also says, “To make sure that you are able to enjoy your investment when it fully matures, I have hired the world’s best physician, the world’s best chef, the world’s best physical trainer, and the world’s best security service to protect you.” This is what Peter is saying. We have a future that is absolutely guaranteed and predictable, because we are being protected by God’s power every day so that we will be there to enjoy what God has so faithfully stored away for us. What a future!

Consider how these two “*thens*” can alter the way you view the midlife struggles of the moment. We cannot allow present difficulty to loom so large in our eyes that it blocks out our vision of the past and the future. Even the most significant moment in your life is but one piece of your personal story. Your story stretches from before the foundations of the world were laid down all the way into the distant regions of eternity. No matter what you are going through now, it is vital to remember that God harnessed the forces of nature, controlled the events of human history, and sent and sacrificed his one and only Son in order to give you new birth. No matter how hard the difficulties of the present seem, you need to say to yourself, “This is not *it* for me, because I have a rich and eternal future that has been locked away and guaranteed. Whatever is at stake at this moment cannot rob me of the new life and eternal hope that God has given me, and those are the only things that are really worth living for.”

And Now for Now

Although the “*then-then*” perspectives of Peter’s summary are exciting, his primary focus is *now*. Peter is answering the question that we so often ask, “What in the world is going on?” A more biblical way to state the question is, “What in the world is God doing?” The way you answer these questions will have a profound effect on the way you deal with the blessings and trials that come your way in midlife.

In defining and explaining what in the world God is doing now, Peter says that “now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” What a description of what is going on now! In this time between the “*then of the past*” and the “*then of the future*,” trials and grief are our unavoidable realities. You and I wish we were smart enough to avoid difficulty and all the grief that goes with it, but we cannot, and Peter tells us why. He says that these trials have *so that* (purpose clause) your faith may be refined. It’s here that we find a powerful metaphor which explains why this “now” period is a time of inescapable trial and grief.

Peter is using a powerful metaphor from the world of metallurgy. When the metallurgist mines the metal, it is in an ore state with a mixture of dross. That means there are inherent corruptions in the metal that rob it of its strength and beauty. In order to bring the metal to its purest state, the metallurgist applies white hot heat until the ore is liquefied and boiling. In this process, the corruptions are boiled out, and it becomes fundamentally stronger and more beautiful than it was before.

What are trials? They are God’s boiling pot. When we come to Christ we are dross corrupted Christians. We are carrying around inherent corruptions inside of us that rob us of our strength and beauty. So God, in the grandeur and faithfulness of his redemptive love, boils us. The difficulties that come our way are not a sign of his unfaithfulness and inattention. No, they are an indication of his love. He knows that we are not yet what we were meant to be. He has dug us out of the mine, but we need to be refined.

Now why is this so hard for us to deal with? I am convinced that it is because **we tend to live with a *destination* mentality. We want life to be as easy, satisfying, and good as it can be, immediately in the here and now. But, this isn’t a time of destination. Peter says our destination is guaranteed, but we will not have it now. Now is a time of *preparation*.** It is a time of radical personal growth and change, so God applies white hot heat to prepare us for the destination to come.

Think about life struggles from this perspective. Why does this stage of life have to be marked by painful trial? Because that is exactly what God designed it to be in order to complete the amazing thing he has begun in us. Your struggle is not taking place because Christianity does not work, or because God’s promises aren’t trustworthy, or because God is unfaithful. Your struggle is actually a proof of his presence, his faithfulness, and his love. He is near you and he loves you too much to let you stay in your dross state. He is boiling you until you reach that highest state of strength and beauty, the likeness of Christ.

I am deeply convinced that we need to be preaching the theology of *uncomfortable grace* to one another. Peter says that the trials that grieve us are the trials of grace. God is patiently and perseveringly doing exactly what he promised. He is delivering us from sin and forming us into the image

of his Son. I am persuaded that many times, as we are wondering where God's grace is and crying out for it, we are actually getting it. **The problem is that we are seeking the *grace of release*, when God knows that we need the *grace of refinement*.** During this "now" period of preparation, God's grace will come to us again and again in uncomfortable forms.

This is where we tend to have an agenda conflict with our Lord. We don't tend to be very excited about being Christ-like and holy. Instead, we get excited about being around people who love and affirm us. We get excited about children who grow up and do what is right. We get excited about making plans that actually come true. We get excited about physical health. We get excited about investments that have a good return. We get excited about having a safe, successful, stress-free, and predictable life. The problem with all of these things is not that they are wrong to desire. **The problem is that we have settled for far too little.** And we are surprised, shocked, and disappointed when God shakes them in order to refine us. You see, God has planned more and better things for us than we would want for ourselves. He is not content for us to be content with situational and relational ease. He will settle for nothing less than that we would become partakers of his divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

How do you assess a good day? Do you tend to celebrate the smooth-running, unobstructed days and curse the days when difficulty has been in your path? How small a trial is able to make you angry? How quick are you to question God and his goodness? How apt are you to lash out at others who seem to have gotten in the way of your plan? How much do you envy the apparent ease of others? How much is your joy and contentment directly tied to comfort and ease? Are you in an agenda-collision with your Lord? Do you live with a destination-mentality, cursing the heat of preparation when it comes your way?

God's Story and Life's Struggles

You cannot read 1 Peter, Romans 5, or James 1 without concluding that there is redemptive purpose to the pain of life's struggles. Peter states it very clearly in verse 9, "you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." In those times when you are tempted to see yourself as losing, you are really gaining. In those times when you are tempted to be captivated by what you have not received, you are receiving something of eternal worth. In those moments when it seems like life has passed you by and God has forgotten you, you are actually the object of his focused and productive redemptive love. In those moments when you feel like you've lost your will to fight, God is fighting for your soul. The painful regret, the disappointment of broken dreams, and the scary specter of old age are, in the hands of your Lord, the boiling pots of redemption. He is freeing your soul from bondage to your *own* righteousness, from slavery to your *own* dreams, and from false refuge in physical things that are progressively passing away.

Peter calls you to look beyond the regret and disappointment and embrace the glory of refinement. **God loves you so much that it is impossible for him to be satisfied to keep you in your dross state.** Yes, you will experience loss and disappointment. Yes, you will look back and be flooded with the pain of regret. Yes, you will long for the return of your youth. But each one of these experiences is meant by God to produce a harvest of good fruit in you. It is not only right to mourn what you have lost, but you also must celebrate the redemption to be found in the middle of it.