

## Love for the Unseen Christ

### 1 Peter 1:8-9

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Peter wrote 1 Peter to exiles in Asia Minor but he might as well have written it to us. Change the names a little and the content of this letter is totally appropriate to us. Our struggles. Our trials. Our pain. How should we deal with life's trials as a Christian? Life in this fallen world brings so many our way. Many of us here are dealing with crushing trials. It is increasingly difficult to live a Christian lifestyle in an increasingly anti-Christian and secular America.

What will be the experience of a Christian in America in the next 30 years? What will our children experience, assuming they embrace the faith of their Christian parents? How will they remain faithful to circumstances that are likely more difficult than what we face?

In my understanding of 1 Peter at this point, the verse before us is Peter's key point and holds the secret to glorifying God through suffering. It is a privilege to exposit this passage today.

*"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."* (1 Peter 1:8-9)

Even with Snowmageddon last weekend, I hope you recall what Peter has just previously said about trials. He compared our faith to gold in the heat of the furnace. That furnace heats up the gold and reveals impurities, non-gold, that can be removed. The result of the furnace is that the gold is revealed and refined. Our faith is like gold and trials are like heat. Trials reveal and refine our faith. They get us ready for a future moment of glory when Jesus is revealed.

For us, that revelation happens either when we die or when Jesus returns. That moment will be a whole new faith experience for the vast majority of Christians who have ever lived. Except very, very few, what do we all have in common? We have never seen Jesus; not with our eyes. To be a Christian is to put all your eternal hope in someone you have never met in person. Does that sound weird? Is this some kind of religious version of marrying a woman you've never met? E-Harmony for eternity? Or is there something else going on here? Something far more wonderful.

Of course Peter himself was an eyewitness. He lived, walked, ate, and talked with Jesus over a roughly three-year period. Further, Jesus appeared many times to Peter after his resurrection. Other than Jesus' family, nobody had more eye time with Jesus than Peter.

Perhaps that's why he's thinking, *These Asia Minor Christians don't realize what my own eyes have seen*. So he describes their unseeing faith experience in Jesus. We are in the same situation as them having never seen Christ, yet we love him, believe in him, and rejoice in him.

## Unseen Yet We Love Him

*"Though you have not seen him, you love him."* (1 Peter 1:8)

For us, seeing and loving go naturally together. People talk about love at first sight, which in my understanding of covenantal marriage, is a very shallow use of the word "love." Men more likely have lust at first sight. The love described here is not sexual or marital, it is the New Testament's favorite word for God's love for us. *Agape*. We have talked about this kind of love and defined it as *"self-giving for the good and joy of another."* This is love of a different and deeper quality. It was this agape that God the Father extended to us in sending Jesus to live, die, and ultimately save us. It was this love that Jesus showed us by dying for our sins.

Verse 8 is not God's love to us or our love to each other but our love for Jesus. 1 John 4:19 says, *"We love because he first loved us."* But our love for and toward Jesus is different from nearly any other love we express. It is without sight. It's like the love a parent has for a child in the womb. It is a real love, but it is love for an unseen person. The love that saving faith creates in us is genuine love for a Savior who has "agaped" us but we have never seen.

## Unseen Yet Believe in Him

*"Though you do not now see him, you believe in him."* (1 Peter 1:8)

This part of the verse is in present tense—you don't *now* see him yet you believe in him. Does this remind you of anyone famous in the Bible for refusing to believe in Jesus without seeing him? Jesus' disciple, Thomas. Do you recall the story? In John 20, after Jesus was resurrected he appeared in the Upper Room to all his disciples except Thomas wasn't there. They said to him, *Thomas, we have seen the Lord! He is alive!* Thomas the Skeptic replied, *"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."* (John 20:25)

Thomas is the patron saint of the cynic and the doubter. What is their issue? They refuse to believe something they cannot empirically put to the test of their own sight. Other people's testimony about Jesus' claims to deity, supernatural life, and resurrection from the dead are not enough for them. They refuse to live by faith and not by sight.

*"Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"*  
(John 20:26-29)

Who is Jesus talking about here? Who are blessed to not see yet believe? He is describing 99.99999% of Christians in all of history. He is describing Old Testament saints like Moses and Abraham and David. If we living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century had the skeptical spirit of Thomas, none of us would ever love him because none of us would ever see him with our own eyes.

But here we are on a central truth about the kind of faith that saves. Christian faith has a kind of seeing that does not involve the eyes. Faith has its own eyes. Faith is not blind and Christianity is not irrational or anti-intellectual. We are not making a blind leap. There is

enough evidence so that my faith can be a thinking faith but not enough evidence for saving faith to simply be reasoned into. The writer of Hebrews gives the classic definition: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

The kind of faith in Jesus that saves us is when I come to understand the claims of the gospel about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. There arises in my heart a conviction that these claims are true. Faith is embracing the claims of Christianity by embracing the Christ of Christianity. My faith sees in the gospel and through the gospel a beautiful and lovely Savior. It finds assurance of sins forgiven and eternal life in him. It sees the unseen Christ and loves him.

### **Unseen Yet Rejoice in Him**

*"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." (1 Peter 1:8)*

Here Peter describes the Christian experience at its best and highest expression. Our faith sees the unseen loveliness of Jesus and all the wonderful gains in knowing him, and this produces within us joy. Joy that is *"inexpressible and filled with glory."* The word for rejoice in the original language means, "to experience a state of great joy and gladness, often involving verbal expression and appropriate body movement—to be extremely joyful, to be overjoyed, to rejoice greatly." (J.P. Louw & E.A. Nida) The lexicon adds, *I shout because of my joy.* But the text adds, *inexpressible.* I would shout words of joy but my joy is such that I cannot even get the words out.

Humans have these kinds of joy moments where they simply are moved beyond verbal expression. Think of a small child opening a gift and running in place, in circles, squealing. Adult expressions tend to be more subdued. We clap, shout, and dance. There are heights of joy that go beyond our ability to describe them. That is "joy inexpressible."

It would be easy for me to preach a guilt trip or an emotional high here and say, we need to sing and dance and shout all the time and if you are a real Christian, life is lived on an emotional plane beyond words or description. I think I could get some amens. But most of us would leave here depressed. I would. My Christian experience is not one perpetual goose-bump of happiness. Life is painful and filled with disappointments. Criticism hits home. Physical pain is real. Things don't turn out the way we hope. In fact, Peter, *why would you put this verse here on the heels of teaching about painful trials?* Joy and pain don't go together, do they? When I hurt, I'm not happy. When I'm happy, I don't hurt.

I have wrestled with this passage and I want to tell you what I think at this point of my life and understanding of Scripture: Peter is describing Christian faith as it can be, as it should be, and as it will be.

### **Christian Faith as it Will Be**

Who here wouldn't want to experience joy in Jesus like this? Be encouraged, our entire eternal experience will be rejoicing with joy that is *"inexpressible and filled with glory."* If we could interview right now Merle McCleskey and Pete Urhammer, two members of our church who died recently and are seeing Jesus right now, we would ask them, "What is it like?" "We are rejoicing with joy inexpressible filled with glory." If we asked them why, what would they say? "We see Him. We see the Lord. We've talked with him. He told us how much he loves us. We never knew joy like this was possible. I can't describe it to you."

Psalm 16:11 says, *"In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* Peter is giving us a glimpse into eternity's joy. Perfect joy.

### **Christian Faith as it Can and Should Be**

This is what he is getting at in this passage. Heaven's joy is part of the present Christian experience, only here we have to fight for joy. Our faith has a present capacity for deep and abiding joy in Jesus. It is a fight because of indwelling sin. It is a fight because of sin and evil around us. None of those will impede our fullness of joy in heaven.

Here there are all these are joy-stealers. Sin kills joy. Trials cloud our thinking. In moments of spiritual clarity, we look at our world through the lens of the gospel and Jesus seems great to us. Then we give in to a temptation. We choose to believe that there is greater joy in gossip or porn, or coveting our neighbor's whatever than in savoring Jesus by faith. Guess what happens to our joy inexpressible? Out the window it goes. Think of David's prayer after adultery with Bathsheba in Psalm 51:12, *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation."* Christians, we know what he is talking about, don't we? When Jesus is our highest hope and love, there is a kind of gladness in the soul that is truly wonderful. When something else or someone else is enthroned in my heart, that spiritual gladness disappears. We miss it. David did. He longed for closeness again with God. He longed for that soulish joy that allowed him to write, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."* (Psalm 23:4)

David in Psalm 23 and Peter in 1 Peter 1:8 are saying the same thing. Trials? Valleys of shadow and death? What could these have to do with joy?

### **Trials Magnify to us the Joy of Knowing Jesus (i.e. We Love Him More)**

The writer of Hebrews writes to people who have gone through extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Listen carefully to his description.

*"But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."* (Hebrews 10:32-34)

These Christians went through some terrible experiences. Public humiliation. Imprisonment. Think today of Christians living in Sudan or how Iraqis must feel as ISIS advances on their village or town. How could you be joyful when people are going into your house and taking away everything of value? This is not a happy thing for us, but for them it was?

On one level, of course not. Nobody chooses this. How could they have joy in a trial like this? *"Since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."* What possession did these Christians have that so trumped the loss of other possessions that losing them actually caused them joy? Their possession is the same possession of every genuine Christian. They had Jesus and eternal life through him. In their soulish estimation, that possession was so wonderful that the taking of their worldly possessions actually gave them joy because it highlighted the value of having Christ. Their joy in Jesus was magnified by the loss. By the trial. By the persecution. The loss of the temporal actually increased their joy in the eternal.

If you had tickets to the Super Bowl, but they were in the last row of the stadium, behind a pillar, next to a drunk, and someone came to you and said, "I'm giving you front row tickets but to do so I have to take your back row tickets," how upset would you be at losing the back row tickets? Not at all. In fact, losing them would make you feel better about having the front row tickets. During the game you look back to the top row seat which you lost and you say, "Yes!"

What are trials? They generally involve losing something. I lose my job. I lose my health. I lose a relationship with someone I love. I lose my security or my identity. Trials involve life taking something from us. What does it feel like? It feels like pain. Physical. Emotional. It hurts.

For the Christian, where does joy come from? In heaven, it's seeing and savoring Christ forever. On earth? It's the same. Trials cloud our view or distract us or discourage us. Our focus is on our loss—it's on back row Super Bowl tickets we no longer have.

Here's the key. ***God often takes lesser possessions from us so we cherish having the eternal ones.*** The extent to which we cherish Christ above all things in this life is the extent to which we will have joy inexpressible and full of glory now. Trials clarify like nothing else where our real value lies.

Here is the beauty of Christian joy. Since it is found in Jesus, circumstances here shouldn't take it away. This is not either/or, it is both/and. We can experience sorrow and joy. We can experience grief and joy. We can experience pain and joy. We can even experience death and see that death as gain (Philippians 1:21) because after death I get more of Jesus, the source of my hope and joy.

When I think of key points of pain in my life, in nearly every case, I have come from that trial more aware that this world is disappointing and more appreciative of what I have in the Lord Jesus Christ. I have a sense of peace because at least for a time, my heart is purified and my desires for the Lord are heightened.

How about you? Christian, are you in a trial right now? Pain. Threat of loss. Wondering why? Can pain and joy coexist in your soul? It can if your joy isn't in the hope of getting rid of your pain but in a Savior who entered into our pain and died for it. *Joy in Jesus*, in the words of the old preacher, *the world didn't give it and the world can't take it away.*

*"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."* (1 Peter 1:8)

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