

## ***Lost in the Middle***

### **Chapter 7: Painful Faith: God's Story and Suffering**

#### ***Stories (from chapter 6, pp. 171-177)***

As God's child, your story is a chapter in His story. The Bible is God's telling of His story so that we can know Him, know ourselves, and live in a way that is consistent with His plot. The problem is that not only do we want to occupy center stage (which is reserved for God alone), but we also want to be novelists. We spend a lot of time trying to write our own stories and are often upset and anxious because the plot we have written is not unfolding.

Midlife is the God-ordained collision of two stories. Even though Don didn't realize it, there were two competing stories developing in his life. Both stories could not coexist because both were in direct competition for Don's heart. They defined life, identity, meaning, and purpose in very different ways. ... The dramatic and painful collision [of the two stories] was not God turning his back on Don, but God turning his face *toward* him. It was not an ending, but a God-given new beginning.

Seven prominent threads run through the fabric of God's story.

- God's story is a story of suffering.
- God's story is a control story.
- God's story is a worship story.
- God's story is a drama of identity.
- God's story is about values.
- God's story is a story of grace.
- God's story is an eternity story.

#### ***Suffering: A Bad and Good Thing (pp. 184-188)***

A robust and practical theology of suffering is one of the most essential tools for making sense out of the struggles of midlife. ... To have an accurate, biblically balance view of suffering, you must first say that suffering is a bad thing. Its existence points out all the things that are wrong with us and our world. ... Having said this to yourself, you must now turn and say that suffering is a good thing. Suffering is an evil that an all-wise, all-righteous, and all-loving God uses for eternal good (see Rom. 5:1-5; James 1; 1 Peter 1:3-9). ... The Bible never downplays the evil of suffering. When you seek to understand suffering biblically, you cannot opt for an easy "either-or." No you must hold on to two seemingly opposite perspectives. To be right about suffering, you must disagree with yourself. The suffering that we all experience in this fallen world is very, very bad, yet in the hands of God it becomes something that is very, very good. ... If it is someone else's suffering, you and I tend to be able to see the "good" that can result,

but if it's our own suffering we are tempted not to believe in the love and faithfulness of God.

There is no better place to learn how to understand and deal with suffering than on the hill of Calvary. It is here that the two disparate perspectives on suffering come together as essential pieces of the ultimate moment of hope. Pete says in Acts 2:23 that Jesus of Nazareth was "handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge." ... God was in control of all this, doing something that would result in the salvation of all of His people. The cross was a very good thing.

But then Peter turns and says something equally important. He says, "You, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). Could there be any more wicked thing to do than to put to death the Messiah? ... Peter reminds you and me that we cannot look at the cross and simply say that it was a good thing. It was the most horribly evil thing that was every done in all of human history.

Complete sovereignty is essential to the accomplishment of redemption. God must have the unchallenged power and authority to do whatever is necessary to redeem His children. This means that He is ruling over all things, even those things that we would say are evil, and using them for His good redemptive purpose. ... At the same time, nowhere in the Bible does the sovereignty of God absolve evil people from their responsibility for the evil they have done. ... Recognizing that the crucifixion was a very bad thing done by morally evil people actually highlights the need for the very thing the cross was ordained to accomplish. ... Ultimate evil and ultimate good were made to kiss. When you see and understand the cross biblically, you can begin to have a balanced perspective on the suffering that is so much a part of midlife.

### ***Pain: The One Thing that Gets Everyone's Attention (pp. 188-193)***

Pain tends to be the one thing in life that always gets our attention. ... We enter life through suffering's door and we exit life through suffering's door. ... What should you do with you midlife suffering? Listen to your pain. It is telling you something that you need to hear.

1. ***You live in a fallen world.*** Because of the universality of suffering, our lives are more powerfully shaped by *how* we suffer than they are by the fact *that* we suffer.
2. ***There is something wrong with you.*** God has built warning systems into our lives just like a smoke alarm. The pain of disappointment is mean to warn you and propel you to action. The pain of regret is mean to warn you and spur you to action. The pain of aging is meant to warn you and call you to action.
3. ***Your suffering is not okay.*** It is very important that you are never "okay" with your suffering. We should all hate all kinds of suffering. ... You should hate the fact that sin has entered your world and damaged you and everything around you. ... The struggles of midlife should make you angry ... at what sin has done to God's original creation. ... This deep-seated hatred of sin and its effects will drive each of us to seek and celebrate redemption.
4. ***You are not alone.*** There are two reasons why we never suffer alone. First, because we all live in the same world. ... Second, and it is humbling to admit, we

bring much of our suffering on ourselves. ... In your midlife suffering, you must remind yourself that you are not alone. You have more friends in suffering than you ever knew. More importantly, you have a Friend in suffering that you may be tempted to forget (see Hebrews 2:10-11).

5. ***There is something better to come.*** In each moment of suffering there is a promise of a new and better world, a world where sin, sorrow, and suffering no longer have a place. God will not rest until each of His children has been rescued and the world has been totally restored (see Romans 8:18ff).

### ***Then-Then-Now (pp. 193-199)***

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.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

<sup>4</sup>to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

<sup>6</sup>In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup>whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, <sup>9</sup>receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of *your* souls (1 Peter 1:3-9).

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. ... From day one He has had a single focus: redemption.

Next Peter looks at the *then of the future*. In verses four and five Peter points us to something that is as 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."

Consider how these two "*thens*" can alter the way you view the midlife struggles of the moment. We cannot allow present difficult to loom so large in our eyes that it blocks out our vision of the past and the future. ... Your story stretches from before the foundations of the world were laid down all the way into the distant regions of eternity.

Although the "*then-then*" perspectives of Peter's summary are exciting, his primary focus is *now* (vv. 6-9). ... 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. ... These trials have come *so that* (purpose clause) your faith may be refined.

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.

Now why is this so hard for us to deal with? I am convinced it is because we tend to live with a *destination* mentality. ... Peter says our destination is guaranteed, but we will not have it now. Now is a time of *preparation*. ... 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.

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. ... 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. ... The problem with [all of the things that do excite us] is not that they are wrong to desire. The problem is that we have settled for far too little. ... 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).

You cannot read 1 Peter 1, Romans 5, or James 1 without concluding that there is a redemptive purpose to the pain of midlife struggle. Peter states it very clearly in verse 9, "you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

### ***And Now for a Practical Plan (pp. 200-207)***

<sup>13</sup>Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; <sup>14</sup>as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, *as* in your ignorance; <sup>15</sup>but as He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, <sup>16</sup>because it is written, "*Be holy, for I am holy.*"

<sup>17</sup>And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear; <sup>18</sup>knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. <sup>20</sup>He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you <sup>21</sup>who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

<sup>22</sup>Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, <sup>23</sup>having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever (1 Peter 1:13-23).

The Bible does not give you sheet music, but it gives everything that you need to live in harmony with the God who has written the melody. ... The seven directives that Peter lays out for us are the key signature and the time signature for a harmonious life with God.

1. ***Be careful what you think (v. 13).*** The Bible exegetes and interprets life for us. When we hold ourselves to the highest standards of biblical thinking, we place ourselves in the best position to respond to life in the right way.
2. ***Be self-controlled (v. 13).*** In our union with Christ, the power of sin over us has been broken, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us battles with our sinful nature on our behalf. With these great gifts, we can stand in the middle of raging emotion and desire and turn in another direction.
3. ***Watch where you put your hope (v. 13).*** Midlife is a time when we can learn as we never have before to put our hope in the one place where it will never disappoint us: in the Lord.
4. ***Don't give way to wrong desires (v. 14).*** Midlife is a time when it is vital to fight the war of desire, because what you give your heart to, before long you will give your body to as well.
5. ***Be committed to do what is right, no matter what (v. 15).*** The standard here is the Lord. ... There is nothing that God has ever thought, desired, spoken, or done that is not essentially and absolutely holy! That standard is our standard for daily living.
6. ***Live here as a stranger (v. 17).*** If what we're living in is not a time of destination but of preparation, then we should live here as if we are pilgrims. ... Realize that you are not at home and treat this like the journey that it is. Live with one eye on eternity.
7. ***Be devoted to living a life of love (v. 22).*** Scripture is very clear that we were never meant to go it alone. Life is a community project. Midlife, a time when people are often less encumbered than they once were and therefore more able to love and serve others, often becomes a time marked by self-focus and self-love. ... Is your life shaped by a devoted love of others or devotion to yourself?

Midlife is one of God's most effective boiling pots. God's grace is not only making you uncomfortable, it is refining you. Don't doubt your Father's goodness. Don't question His love. Don't allow yourself to run away from Him. Run to Him in faith and love and be thankful that He loves you so much that He refuses to walk away until what He started in you is absolutely complete.