

Release the Pain of Challenge

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1 Peter 5:10

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

When I was a child, if either my brother or I complained that a piece of meat we were eating was tough Mom would say, “It would be tougher if you didn’t have it.”

The wisdom hidden within those words was lost to me for most of my childhood. But somewhere in adulthood I understood the idea of being grateful for what we have, who we are, and where we are at this present moment, despite the challenges and heartaches.

There is a time to put aside complaints and look the difficulty square in the eye and accept that it is there, and that this is just the way it is right now. This piece of meat is tough...but I can still cut it and chew it. It may have to be in smaller bits, but it will still give me the nourishment I need to be healthy.

Sometimes in my life I have lamented that things were not easier – that I hadn’t gotten the good breaks, that things hadn’t gone well for me or easily for me. There have been times when I have enjoyed my pity parties and have felt sorry for myself, and wondered what was coming next...what new

disaster was just waiting for me to peek my head around the corner.

Again, at some point, I have learned that this is life; this is what it is like on this earth. Life can be tough at times. We are going to experience pain, trials, lost loved ones, illness, inconvenience, hardship, emotional and spiritual stresses, and the list goes on. This is all part of life, and according to Peter it shouldn't come as a surprise.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;” – 1 Peter 4:12

Everyone, absolutely everyone experiences these things. The Buddhists call it *dukkha*. The Buddha explained it this way: "*Dukkha* is not getting what you want and getting what you don't want." It is suffering, pain, or unsatisfactoriness.

Life can be hard, and like me you may have prayed for relief from the struggle and for things to get easier. But perhaps that's not what God has in mind. I believe our 35th president understood this principle. John F Kennedy once said: “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men.”

Whether we like it or not, and I don't think I've met anyone who really likes it, God uses hardship and struggle to shape us according to His plan, not ours. God doesn't create our strife, but He will use it. These challenges are not meant to break us. They are meant to intensify our faith, strengthen us, and focus our hearts

and minds on our Source of strength. Life is tough, but we were made tougher.

The high school I attended was heavy into physical fitness. One of the physical tests we had to endure was call the ‘man-lift-and-carry’. We had to find someone within 5 pounds of our weight, and then we had to carry them on our backs. My Freshman year I think I could go a half mile, but by my Senior year I think it was 2 miles we had to carry this guy on your back. It was an exhausting, difficult exercise. Every year it was something everyone hated, including the person that had to be carried.

No matter how good of shape I was in, each year I felt equally wiped out after that arduous physical exertion. That is just the way it was going to be...because that was the point! The entire intent of that event, as is every exercise, is to push your body to a capacity beyond what you normally give – regardless of how feeble you may feel – into growth and progress.

Each of those high school years I was stronger, better equipped to face the challenges, but equally spent at the end of that test. This is life, and we are being conditioned by God through our challenges. God needs us to be all that we can be so that the fullest expression of Spirit is possible through us. So we are going to be challenged, pushed, and tested – but never more than we can handle.

Sometimes we make excuses about our abilities to handle life, or our talents. We say, “If only I wasn’t so short (or tall or old,

whatever our favorite excuse is) then I could do better in life.

But life is highly scalable. I have an Achilles tendon injury that I developed when I was forty. It still bothers me, and it prevents me from jumping and running easily. So I find other things to do: I can row and walk and do various exercises to help my body.

And so it is in life – the intensity and the activities of life are being scaled to our own personal abilities, limits, talents, and requirements.

Although we may feel battered and beat up at the end of the day, despite our weaknesses and limitations we are getting stronger, our endurance is increasing, our recovery time is shortening, we are becoming wiser and more of what God needs us to be.

Dukkha – stress, frustrated desires, and inconvenience – is part of life. But it is not all that life offers. The Christ says, *"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

When we need a break, there is time to relax and enjoy. Some people have difficulty with this aspect of life. They so much engage the challenges that they forget that part of getting stronger is in the recovery time. They are looking forward to the next difficulty and sometimes worry about difficulties that don't even exist yet.

“Don’t worry; be happy,” sings Bobby McPherson. Yet, it is natural and normal to grieve after the loss of a loved one. It is necessary to take this time. It is natural to feel disappointed at not attaining something we desired. It is normal to feel depressed when we are emotionally drained. All these feelings are natural, and necessary in order to take time to find our center of peace and balance again.

Just as in injuries to the body, we need the time to heal properly before we initiate a new series of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual challenges. The time will come to re-engage life – when the time is right.

God intends for us to love, enjoy, pursue new and novel things, create, serve ... smell the flowers, enjoy the sunsets, but most importantly move inside our hearts and settle down for some time alone with the inner Christ – to pray, meditate, and contemplate.

This is where we find spiritual rest and renewal. It is in the comfort and peace of God that we come to make our most important realizations.

One of which is this: although pain in life is inevitable, suffering is not. We choose to suffer. We may want to have a new home, but lack the financial resources to acquire one, so we are frustrated. And the more we persevere on our condition, the more the frustration grows, and soon we are suffering.

Suffering begins when we do not release the pain of our challenges. This meat is tough God. “It would be tougher if you didn’t have it, Patrick. Be glad for what you have and release your dissatisfaction so that you stop suffering.”

When we are living from a perspective of complaint and dissatisfaction, we are caught in the midst of dukkha. When we meet the challenges in life by fighting and resisting, life seems tougher, harder, and more adversarial. We tend to blame God for all our difficulties and then take things into our own hands, without God as an ally. We are on guard, expecting the worst; hoping for peace and rest yet it tauntingly remains a step away.

The solution is to surrender it to God. The phrase “Let go, let God” became popular many years ago and is appropriate. This does not mean inactivity or submission. It means to release the judgments on what we encounter. What we get or don’t get is neither good nor bad; it just is. When we stop naming it, we stop reacting in particular ways and solutions are more forthcoming.

Christ encourages us to find that place of peace where we can say, “This meat is tough, God,” and we are not complaining at all, but simply making an unbiased observation. No ego is involved, no judgment.

Through that higher mindset we rise above our circumstances and are seeing through the eyes of the Christ. We can experience the pain, exhaustion, and and challenge of life but

not feel battered, because we release it all; we do not ‘man-lift-and-carry’ our turmoil and fears around on our backs. Spirit can flow through us unimpeded when we are unimpeded. We will still have desires, dreams, and other forms of ‘Divine Discontentment’ that arise, but we are not enslaved by them; we are inspired. We know that they are placed in our hearts as blueprints for where Spirit guides us. When we can release the fear around our dreams, we can move into action.

This meat is tough...”Good point,” says God. “Let’s do something about it.” Then we work together with Spirit to achieve some useful end.

We will feel dissatisfaction, disappointment, and even some suffering in this life. But we can learn not to judge what we are living through. Life can be tough, but God has made us tougher, and with God we can manage it. We can release the pain of our challenges; we can take small steps, one step at a time. We can take hold of God’s hand for balance. We can accept the love and help of those who God sends into our lives.

Whatever we receive or don’t receive we can cut the dukkha it into small pieces, chew it thoroughly, and swallow it knowing full well that before the waste and negative are eliminated we are gaining all the nutrition from our challenge that God intended to restore us and make us strong, firm, and steadfast.

Let us pray....