

All the Difference

a Bible study note from Wayne Braudrick

Trials are purposeful

Peter rather shocks our sensibilities in his first letter. He especially jangles the modern ear when he states:

In this [our great salvation] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:6-7 NASB)

What bothers us so much is the little phrase “if necessary.” In the progress of western civilization, Christian ethics have had a profound reach. Humans now consider it abnormal when people suffer or are bullied. Appropriately, from a biblical worldview, we are appalled by the horrors of persecution, even terming such things “inhuman” (an interesting term, as both experience and the scriptures depict that since Genesis 3 inhumanity is actually quite human).

In our day an emphasis on love, compassion, equity and other Christian virtues has captured our thinking. And that is greatly good! However, we are prone to miss the equally valid biblical reality that trials are purposeful. In Peter’s word, they are necessary, and that’s what troubles us. Ensnared in our entitled minds, we feel quite sure that we should never suffer, never face trials; further, we’re quite offended by any implication that such difficulties are “necessary.”

The Horse and His Boy

C.S. Lewis attacked our resistance to Peter’s “necessary” phrase through his marvelous book *The Horse and His Boy*. This was the fifth title in Lewis’ Narnia series, and is my favorite of all his writings. (According to Narnian chronology, it is often depicted as third volume in the series. Personally, I prefer to observe how an author’s mind develops and thus I read series in order of publication; however, others choose to read according to internal chronology.)

In *The Horse and His Boy*, the young hero Shasta reaches the climax of the story while atop a mountain. Wrapped in a dark fog that symbolizes the limits of our understanding and vision, Shasta is engaged in conversation by Aslan. Aslan is the divine character, the great lion, son of the Emperor-over-the-sea. Shasta does not know Aslan is a lion, because he cannot see him in the fog. In fact, Shasta has no idea to whom he is speaking. He merely thinks of it as the “Large Voice.” During their conversation, Shasta vaults into a long soliloquy covering all the miseries of his life:

He told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape

and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers...and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded [his companion] Aravis. And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat.

What comes next is straight out of 1 Peter. Look at Lewis' next lines:

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" said Shasta.

"There was only one lion," said the Voice.ⁱ

Aslan goes on to explain that he was the lion in each of Shasta's trials. Then, lest we miss Lewis' application, Aslan gives a beautiful Trinitarian explanation of himself. He answers Shasta's question "Who are you?" with a three-fold rendering of the word "Myself." Aslan, the speaker for a Triune deity, expresses that all the lions in life were necessary. And he was the one in charge each time.

In 1 Peter 1, the Triune God, the Largest Voice, speaks to us in our fog and says that trials are necessary. He reminds us that He is sovereign over them all and uses trials to develop us and drive us to our destination. As a whiny, entitled, spoiled brat of a Christian I am deeply rattled by this. However, a certain clarity of vision accompanies the realization, and this should be put to use.

Realizing that God is using trials as a necessity in my life, I am freed to think through all of my past and present troubles. Bright spots previously lost on me are better understood. Directional changes appear less my own doing and more of the Lord's kind shaping of my path. I get a small glimpse of the praise, glory, and honor the Lord will share with me at the end of the journey. After such scrutiny, I find myself praising the God of the trial and thanking Him for my safe passage through such a purposeful necessity.

Lewis understood and depicted this change marvelously. Once Shasta realizes who Aslan is and what he has been accomplishing in Shasta's life, the fog immediately clears. Shasta then realizes that he has made it over the mountain and into Narnia - his goal. And later in the book, when Shasta retreads that same path he crossed in the dark, he notices:

At last they were going in single file along the edge of a precipice and Shasta shuddered to think he had done the same [in the] night without knowing it.

"But of course," he thought, "I was quite safe. That is why the Lion kept on my left. He was between me and the edge all the time."ⁱⁱ

God bless,
Wayne

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"The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith." I Timothy 1:5
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ⁱ Lewis, CS *The Horse and His Boy*, 1970 Collier Edition, p. 157-159

ⁱⁱ Lewis, CS *The Horse and His Boy*, 1970 Collier Edition, p. 176