

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION

“If you have ever questioned God’s love for you when you are suffering, this story will encourage and challenge you. Horace shares the struggles he has faced and how God uses and redeems our pain.”

—**SHEILA WALSH**, co-host of Life Today and author of *Praying Women*

“Horace Williams Jr. takes us on a journey through the scriptures as well as his own experiences to contemplate the causes and purposes of pain and sorrow. The book is filled with the constant encouragement to consider God’s sovereign work for His glory and for our good, even in our most difficult times of suffering. It culminates with a hopeful and comforting chapter on the destiny of all Christians: a glorious, joyful gathering with Christ, where sin and pain are forever banished.”

—**DANIEL SWEET**, senior pastor, Matthew Road Baptist Church

“*The Furnace of Affliction* gives us an in-depth view of how God uses and even orchestrates times of pain and sorrow to refine us into the image of Christ. Horace Williams Jr. shares honest insight into his own life and relies heavily on scripture, making the book a powerful must-read for anyone who has ever felt abandoned by God or struggled to reconcile His love with a world full of suffering.”

—**PHIL MCGLOTHLIN**, associate pastor, Matthew Road Baptist Church

THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION

How God Uses
Our Pain and Suffering
for His Purpose

HORACE WILLIAMS JR.

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To those who've been hurt, are living in pain, or are suffering in silence: May this book give you comfort and encourage you. I pray that the heavenly Father showers you with His peace and caresses your heart with His love as you realize God's purpose for your life.

CONTENTS

GOD USES PAIN AND SUFFERING TO:

Chapter One	Divulge Sin in Our Lives.....	11
Chapter Two	Develop Our Faith.....	21
Chapter Three	Demolish Our Pride.....	33
Chapter Four	Determine Our Path	41
Chapter Five	Demonstrate His Grace.....	55
Chapter Six	Display His Love.....	67
Chapter Seven	Deepen Our Commitment to Him.....	77
Chapter Eight	Deliver Hope, Comfort, and Joy	89
	Conclusion.....	105
	Epilogue.....	111

Introduction

Pain. It is not a word we like to hear or something we enjoy experiencing. In my research over the past few years, I have discovered that many people are unwilling to admit they've faced pain. They may be too hurt or afraid to express the pain they are feeling. They might even be fearful of being mocked, ridiculed, or seen as weak.

However, feeling pain is a fact of life. At some point, we will have to confront it. During the decades God has blessed me with life on this earth, I have experienced pain and suffering in varying degrees.

I vividly remember when a playmate unintentionally split open my forehead in the sandbox when I was four years old. I staggered to the back door of my house, screaming. Blood was streaming down my face. To this day, I have a small scar to remind me of that traumatic event.

I also remember the pain and humiliation of not being able to walk with my classmates for my high school graduation. The discipline involved my attendance at summer school that year. I received my diploma in the mail three months after the ceremony, a few days after my sixteenth birthday.

As a young adult, I remember the agony of being in love and losing that love—I was curled up in a fetal position, crying like a newborn baby because the person I was engaged to be married to had walked away.

In my mid-twenties, I endured heart-wrenching sorrow at my grandmother's funeral while reciting a poem I'd written about her. She helped raise

me, and I spent time caring for her in her later years after her stroke. I became so overwhelmed and was hurting so deeply that I had to fight through my sobbing to finish the poem.

When it comes to my career, even though I've been successful in my almost twenty years in sales and marketing, I carry with me the unexpected and painful experience of being let go from a job. Twice.

We all experience pain in some form or fashion, whether it be chronic physical or emotional pain. We also experience spiritual pain through spiritual warfare as we seek to live for Christ.

I battle with debilitating physical pain every day. Because it has become so familiar to me, I am comfortable talking about it.

The pain I feel is a result of a massive hemorrhagic stroke that I suffered in the summer of 2010—July 1 is a day I will never forget.

While talking to a colleague at the office that day, I dropped the gum bottle I was holding. He called me clumsy and asked me what was wrong. I told him I didn't feel well and asked him to take me home. I didn't realize that the left side of my mouth had begun to droop. Another friend came into my office. I had gotten off the phone with her a few moments earlier, and she was concerned because I sounded funny. I thought she was teasing me, but she dialed 9-1-1 right away when she realized something was terribly wrong; she probably helped saved my life.

In what seemed like an instant, I was on my way to the hospital. When I arrived, I struggled frantically with the nurses as they tried to prepare me for a CT scan. I was desperate to communicate that I was claustrophobic as they attempted to put me into the machine. Then I felt something hit my arm—possibly an injection of some kind—and I was out like a light.

I awakened days later in a dimly lit hospital room with my right leg tethered to the bed to prevent blood clotting. I couldn't sit up, and I screamed for help. A nurse quickly came in, saw I was awake, and went to get the doctor.

The doctor informed me about the stroke and said that my left side had

been paralyzed when a blood vessel burst on the right side of my brain.

My vision was blurry, and I was in a fog for several weeks afterward. I couldn't walk and was introduced to a wheelchair.

To this day, the nerves on the left side of my body radiate through me like electricity. I can't use my left hand to type or hold anything fragile, and the joints on my left side are as stiff as boards from head to toe. Over nine years after the stroke, I still sleep with my left leg elevated to help with blood flow and to minimize the agonizing nerve pain. I never thought I would miss being able to drive a stick shift automobile, wiggle my toes, or bend my foot down into a shoe.

Shortly after my stroke, my mother expressed concern to the doctor at a follow-up visit about the hydrocodone that was part of my prescription regimen.

She was afraid I could become addicted to such a potent opioid. The doctor explained to her that the nerve pains some stroke victims experience are like what you would feel sticking your foot in a pot of boiling water. Finally, someone could articulate the pain I was experiencing—the pain is not like a charley horse or the pain you feel when you hit your funny bone. It is excruciating, searing, relentless pain.

My mother looked at me, and I winked and nodded in agreement with the doctor. The sadness in her eyes was evident as she began to understand the severity of the pain I was trying to manage.

As time went by and I tried to return to a normal life, I had to retake my driving test—I did not want to endanger myself or anyone else. I passed the exam, praise God, and I have been off hydrocodone ever since that test.

I'm learning to live with the pain, and only because of God's strength am I able to make it through each day.

So how does God use pain? Would He get our attention without it? I know that when everything was rainbows and unicorns for me, I made no time for God. My relationship with Him was distant at best.

Of course, since I was raised in a Christian home and dragged to church every Sunday as a child, I knew plenty about God. I even asked Jesus Christ to come into my heart and save me at the age of five.

However, for the thirty-eight years of my life that followed, I tried to do everything on my own. I was self-motivated, selfish, driven to succeed, and headed away from God. Self-motivation and drive are fantastic, but when we are focused on ourselves and not on living for God, adversity will block our paths to real success.

It's beyond disappointing that none of the painful moments I'd endured before the stroke were enough to turn my attention toward God. Only after the stroke when my physical pain and suffering became constant did I decide to recommit to God.

I would lay awake in the hospital at night, not believing what had happened. The pain and humiliation of not being able to care for myself was devastating. I struggled to recite Psalm 23, hindered by my injured brain. I had not prayed with any sincerity in several years, but I asked God for help and healing. I struggled internally, asking why this happened, but in reality, I knew the answer—I had been living a selfish life infused with worldly desires.

In that painful and isolated moment, God spoke to me. He revealed that His desire was not for me to live for myself or to accumulate wealth and things of no heavenly value but to live a life that glorifies Him—to share my testimony of faith with all who will listen (and even those who won't). He saved me from eternal damnation, not so that I'd "stay out of hell," but so that I'd help people know Him and inspire them to live for Christ.

This story of redemption is why I have written this book—not to join you in a pit of misery. But I hope to lift your spirits, encourage your heart, and challenge you to look deep within yourself, despite the painful trials you encounter.

My intent is not to minimize or trivialize your pain; I intend to give you hope amid your suffering. God has a plan and a purpose for your life (Jeremiah 29:11, author's paraphrase). It may be hard to see through the

tears that moisten your face at times, but I speak from experience—God wants what is best for you.

The transformation may involve spending time in the furnace of affliction. God will keep you there as long as it takes to accomplish His will and plan for you.

British author C. S. Lewis states in *The Problem of Pain*, “We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹

Does God seem to be shouting at you through pain and suffering? Have you been listening, or have you been hard of hearing in your walk with Him?

God is just and righteous, and God is holy. Thankfully, He is compassionate as well. His desire is not to do you harm but to conform you to His image.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture, which I committed to memory during the early stages of my spiritual transformation, is this: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

However, the verses that follow are often forgotten or ignored. Read these and commit them to memory. “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:29–31).

From the moment we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we were justified by God through the blood of Jesus Christ and that alone. However, that does not exempt us from experiencing time in the furnace of affliction.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Québec: Samizdat University Press, 1940), 57–58.

God sometimes uses pain to help us develop an intimate relationship with Him. He also uses pain and suffering—our time in the furnace of affliction—to do the following:

- divulge sin in our lives
- develop our faith
- demolish our pride
- determine our paths
- demonstrate His grace
- display His love
- deepen our commitment to Him
- deliver hope, comfort, and joy

We will discuss each of these in this book.

It is my prayer that you will take this time to honestly evaluate your times of anguish and be filled with hope as you begin to understand God's intent for your life.

Join me, and we'll walk through this journey of pain and suffering together.

THE ORIGIN OF SUFFERING

Suffering. Before I explain how God uses our pain for His purpose, I want to explore the word “suffering.” What does it mean to you?

You might have experienced physical pain or maybe even the rarely discussed emotional distress. What about spiritual pain? This is the internal conflict between you and God as your transforming heart battles to live for Christ. The struggle is real for us while living in the corruptness of a human body.

Our sinful nature is a result of what took place in the garden of Eden. From the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they became separated from God. “They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the

day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8).

While taking turns in the blame game, Adam blamed the woman and God, and Eve blamed the serpent (Satan). God put an end to the blaming and cursed everyone involved. This was the origin of suffering.

To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you. Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ‘Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return’” (Genesis 3:16–19).

Despite what took place in the garden, God still desires to have an intimate relationship with us. That is why He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins. His perfect sacrifice gives us the opportunity for fellowship with Him.

Know that pain is not meant to destroy us but to develop us. God wants to use us for His glory. However, to be suitable vessels for Him, we must spend time being transformed in the furnace of affliction. “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:3–5 ESV).

In that painful and
isolated moment,
God spoke to me.

Horace Williams

MY PRAYER

Dear heavenly Father, I am humbled to share some of my moments in the furnace of affliction with those who love You. Thank You for Your desire to continue working on us, Your children, molding, shaping, and preparing us for Your glory. I pray that You will give those of us who are hurting or who have experienced suffering, Your indescribable peace, a peace beyond all understanding. Guard our hearts, Lord. Give us the wisdom we need, which You offer up generously to everyone who asks. Encourage us every step of the way as we seek to live for You. May our lives bring glory to You and draw others to Christ. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

1

GOD USES OUR PAIN AND SUFFERING TO **DIVULGE SIN IN OUR LIVES**

As far back as biblical times, people often assumed that suffering from some physical infirmity or difficulty was a direct result of sin in your life. If you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, God might indeed use pain to help you recognize your need for Him.

You may attempt to camouflage the sins in your life by comparing yourself to the criminals and evildoers that litter our newscasts daily. However, as God states in His Word, that is not the standard to compare yourself to. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

God’s desire is for each of us to come to Him willingly and seek forgiveness for our sins. Only then can we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of Adam’s sin in the garden of Eden, we are infected with a sin nature. In fact, we were born with it.

Now before you object, consider this: Does a child have to be taught how to be selfish or to tell a lie?

Usually, one of the first words a child speaks after mumbling out some version of mommy or daddy is “mine!” If you still refuse to admit you’re a sinner, that may be the exact reason God has you in the furnace of afflic-

tion. He wants your attention. He desires to welcome you into His family. However, sometimes it takes painful situations to grab your attention and remind you that you need the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Being a Christian is more than living a “pretty good” life while being kind to others or going to church regularly. God wants us to have a heart change—a willingness to live for and obey Him.

If you are reading this book and have not admitted to God that you are a sinner and asked Him to forgive you of your sins and come into your heart, you are in for a lot worse than time in the furnace of affliction.

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE

If you continue to refuse your need for the Savior, you are destined to spend eternity in hell. That is not my opinion; it comes directly from the Bible. Hell is not fiction or a fairy tale. Hell is a real place where all who have refused Christ as their Savior will spend eternity.

“Do not fear those who kill the body and are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both the body and soul in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

“His winnowing fork is in His hand and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12).

God is holy, and He cannot tolerate sin. That is why He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to walk the earth in human form and allowed Him to die on the cross and rise from the grave three days later.

It took the sacrifice of the perfect Savior to cover the sins of humankind. However, you must accept this gift of salvation, not only to be rescued from eternal damnation but to live in concert with Him.

I pray that if you don't know Jesus Christ as your Savior, that you will confess your sins and ask Him to be Lord of your life. Salvation is not a

guarantee that your life will always be comfortable. It does mean that you have almighty God living within you through the Holy Spirit.

CHRISTIANS ARE SINNERS TOO

At the age of five, I knelt next to my bed with my mother beside me and asked Jesus to come into my heart. More than anything else, I knew I was deathly afraid of going to hell. However, throughout middle school, junior high, and high school, I had no heart transformation.

I was dragged to Sunday school and church every time the doors were open, but I had no desire to develop my relationship with God. I was not living a Christ-like life, so a lot of my pain and suffering leading up to my stroke was self-inflicted.

As painful as those trying seasons in my life were, I feel I have learned and grown from the experiences. I no longer practice those habitual sins, taking advantage of God's undeserved grace. "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9).

As born-again Christians, we should have a heart change resulting in a shift in our behaviors as we seek to live for Christ.

Transformation takes place in our hearts with the help of the Holy Spirit as we immerse ourselves in God's Word and seek to understand His commandments. When we are too busy or unwilling to do so, God will get our attention.

Here are some of my favorite verses from Psalm 119. They spoke to me loudly after my stroke as I dove into the Bible to understand and know God's purpose for my life.

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes . . . With all my heart I will observe Your precepts. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes . . . Your hands made me and fashioned me. Give me

understanding, that I may learn Your commandments . . . I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and in faithfulness You have afflicted me” (Psalm 119:67–69, 71, 73, 75).

When I read these passages for the first time, everything began to come into focus. I had forgotten or ignored all God’s precepts that I had heard and memorized as a child. (I especially ignored them in my teenage and adult years—ask any of my family members. Or maybe you shouldn’t.)

I did everything I could to avoid the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This included not reading my Bible regularly. I also resisted going to church as often as possible, and in doing so, I missed fellowship with other Christians and the teaching of God’s Word.

I kept busy with my work—I was convinced that I was doing the right thing in providing for myself. Meanwhile, I forgot that it was God who had blessed me with the talents and abilities to thrive in my profession. I lived a self-indulgent, believe-only-in-myself lifestyle until it all came crashing down on me in the form of a life-altering stroke.

The furnace of affliction is a constant tool God uses while we are here on earth. We will experience pain and suffering until He takes us to heaven to live with Him. How long we spend in the furnace has a lot to do with how we respond to God’s ongoing attempts to make us more like Him.

God does not want a bunch of robots walking around saying, “Yes, Master; what can I do, Master?” God has given us a choice—a choice to live a life that pleases and glorifies Him.

God wants to purify us from sin. This is His first step in fulfilling His purpose in our pain.

Our earthly bodies are dying a little bit each day. However, the Holy Spirit lives within us, convicting us of sin and empowering us to live for Christ.

So let me ask you this: can you give up those habitual sins willingly, or do you prefer some prodding from God? I highly recommend you surrender

those sins. Look at the decision that King David made after realizing God knew of his sin.

“When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord;’ and You forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:3–5).

Now, you may be wondering, “Why all this talk about sin?” My dear brother or sister in Christ, God wants to use us for His glory, and He cannot use us if we continue to live in sin. Period.

I’m speaking from experience. Don’t fall into the trap of believing that you are without sin.

DESTRUCTIVE SINS THAT INTERFERE WITH OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

PRIDE

I must continually guard against this sneaky sin. I have been self-assured most of my life. Excelling in athletics during high school gave me extreme confidence as a teenager. As an adult, monetary success and recognition in the corporate world went straight to my head.

I was extremely proud of my accomplishments, but something was missing.

I rarely, if ever, gave God the glory. When we attempt to do things using our own strength without consulting and including God, that is pride. When we pat ourselves on the back without thanking Him, that, too, is pride.

A fine line exists between the self-indulgent pride that comes with an accomplishment and the pride we feel when God blesses us with the ability and talents to achieve said accomplishment.

You will read more about pride as we move on. In the meantime, think about how easy it is to be prideful and not live with a heart of gratitude toward God.

COMPLAINING

This is another one of those sneaky sins that we can quickly fall into a habit of committing daily. We can complain about something from sunrise to sunset without even realizing we are doing so. We may grumble while getting up in the morning. Then we moan about the traffic on the way to work or school. Then we criticize our workloads.

Think about the Israelites and how they behaved on the way to the promised land. After being rescued from slavery and escaping Pharaoh and the Egyptians, they complained repeatedly along their journey.

“The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger’” (Exodus 16:2–3).

Grumbling and complaining is blatant disrespect toward God. Because of Him, we woke up this morning. He has blessed us with the ability to read, write, think for ourselves, and earn a living. He allows us to care for our children and loved ones. He has granted us gifts, talents, and abilities that we use every day. We choose to be disrespectful and dismissive of those blessings when we complain.

Beware of the negative self-talk that permeates your mind and makes its way into the world. God hears everything you say and knows your heart. Complaining is a destructive habit that can quickly become part of your DNA if you’re not careful; it is not representative of who you are intended to be in Christ.

“Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord, and when the Lord heard it, His anger was kindled, and

the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died out” (Numbers 11:1–2).

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:14–15).

SELFISHNESS

Selfishness has been a life-long battle for me. Some of the best times in my life were the years as a toddler before my younger brother was born. I was the center of attention for my grandmother and her best friend across the street as they helped care for me.

They spoiled me rotten and gave me whatever I wanted, which most days was a “hamboogie and chee-chees” or in “adult speak,” a hamburger and Cheetos. Yum!

Three years later, when my first sibling was born, I had to learn the dreaded word “share.” We shared a bedroom, we shared clothes, and we even shared the bathtub.

Now don’t get me wrong, this was nowhere near a Cain-and-Abel situation. I loved and still do love my brother dearly. We grew thick as thieves over time, and I missed him terribly when he joined the US Marine Corps. However, I struggled with living selfishly for many years. It is only by God’s grace that my selfish monster doesn’t rear its ugly head daily.

A painful realization is that selfishness is probably one of the reasons I have remained single for all these years. We must willingly purpose to live selflessly, putting the needs of others ahead of our desires, which I had long failed to do. “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3–4).

Pride, complaining, and selfishness are three sneaky or presumptuous sins that will directly affect our time spent in the furnace of affliction. The purifying process, though necessary, can be piercingly painful as God seeks to remove sin from our lives.

God wants to
purify us from
sin. This is His
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our pain.

Horace Williams

REFINING FIRE QUESTIONS

Are you hurting right now (or have you suffered painful situations in the past)? What type of pain are you experiencing: physical, emotional, or spiritual? Answering these questions is the beginning of seeing God's purpose in your circumstances.

Have you accepted Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, asking Him to forgive you of your sins and come live within your heart? If you have not, what is holding you back?

Are you battling any sneaky sins? What sins are you battling that I didn't mention? What is God saying to you about those sins right now?

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know
my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way
in me and lead me in the everlasting way.

Psalm 139:23–24

2

GOD USES OUR PAIN AND SUFFERING TO **DEVELOP OUR FAITH**

When we accept Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, we experience “saving faith.”

We believe that Jesus came to earth as a baby and that He died on a cross thirty-three years later as a sacrifice for our sins. He was raised from the dead and now sits on a throne in heaven at the right hand of God. However, from the moment we made that decision to trust in Him as our Savior, we became an enemy of Satan, whose fate was sealed the moment Christ rose from the dead. Satan is fully aware that an eternity in hell awaits him.

Satan will bombard us with temptations to steer us away from the path that God has planned.

“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, *firm in your faith*, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5:8–10, emphasis added).

Wow. These three verses give us a lot to digest. This passage of Scripture is one of the first that I committed to memory after my stroke. It reminds

me that I am not the only Christian to experience pain and suffering, and I won't be the last. It also paints a visceral picture of the devil roaming around, looking for the next meal—someone he can rip into shreds!

The beautiful thing about Scripture is that regardless of the stark reality God reveals to us in His Word, He never leaves us without hope. Our suffering will not last forever. God is using our pain to strengthen us for everything He knows we will encounter in the future.

Okay, so we know about saving faith, and as God seeks to strengthen our faith, He develops it through trials. What the devil uses to tempt us, God uses as tests to fortify our faith.

Think back to the Israelites and their journey through the desert. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction’” (Exodus 16:4).

Just as God equips us to defend ourselves against the enemy, our time spent in the furnace of affliction strengthens our faith. He desires to elevate us from saving faith to an entirely different level that equips us for the journey called life.

Of the many people who come to mind when I think of faith, one of the first is Abram, who became Abraham after God changed his name. He had to go through various stages of faith before God could accomplish everything He intended in Abraham’s life.

When we first read of Abram in the Bible, God had instructed him to leave his family and home. Although Abram had no idea where God was leading him, he went willingly with no questions asked. This is an example of solid faith.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing . . . So, Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.’” (Genesis 12:1–2, 4)

The Bible makes no mention of Abram calling friends for their thoughts on what God instructed him to do. He did not check his horoscope in the paper while drinking his morning coffee. He just went. Abraham passed this test with flying colors.

Faith takes time to develop, so prepare yourself to spend time in the furnace throughout your life. God is always at work on your transformation from a sinner headed to hell to a sainted vessel that He can use for His glory.

STRONG FAITH

God promised Abraham and his wife, Sarah, that they would have a son even though they both were advanced in age. He was approaching one hundred years old, and Sarah was not far behind. Abraham believed the Lord, and the Bible states it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Strong faith is empowering, and God desires much more for us. He wants to take us higher. Remember our adversary, the devil? He has not forgotten about you and me. Two favorite weapons that Satan uses to attack and destroy us are doubt and discouragement.

Though Abraham believed God, after ten years of waiting for a child, he and Sarah became discouraged. He listened to his wife's suggestion and had sexual relations with his wife's maid, Hagar, in a foolish attempt to have the child God promised. Hagar did become pregnant and gave birth to a son, but that was not the heir that God was referring to in His promise to Abraham.

Be on alert as you journey on the path God has for you. The fires will burn hotter, and the tests and trials will grow harder as your faith develops.

Even when our faith is strong, we are not immune from stumbling and falling flat on our faces. Trust me, I speak from experience. Satan is not omniscient, but he has his minions, or rather demons, everywhere.

Just like any competent general in an army, Satan studies his opponent. He diligently watches and observes us. He may not tempt us to do some-

thing foolish like rob a bank, but he might plant seeds prompting us to lose our focus on God's plan.

Think back to Eve in the garden of Eden. Satan did not say to her, "Hey, Eve. Do you want to disobey God and be eternally separated from Him? Would you like to be forced to experience unbearable pain during childbirth and be thrown out of the garden forever?"

He was devious. Satan planted seeds of doubt in her mind as he questioned what God had said to Adam.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"' The woman said to the serpent, 'From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" The serpent said to the woman, 'You surely will not die!'" (Genesis 3:1–4).

After we get past the fact that Eve was chatting it up with a snake, we need to recognize that this is how Satan works. He is an accuser. The devil plants seeds of doubt in our heads as he attacks our minds. He wants us to question our salvation, our relationship with Christ, and everything we do in service to Him.

During high school, I allowed the devil to plant his seeds. I had a great circle of friends. I was a superstar athlete in football and became an all-star as a basketball player. I had trophies everywhere at home in recognition of my athletic achievements. High school was one of the most enjoyable times of my life—until it wasn't.

Some of my closest friends were older than me, and I had a strong desire to graduate with them and not be left behind. I committed myself to graduate in three years instead of four.

My school workload was heavy as were the responsibilities of all my athletic endeavors. Along came the enemy to tempt me to make the wrong choices—which I did. I wasn't kicked out of "the garden," but I was denied

the privilege of walking with my graduating class due to cheating.

It was humiliating, painful, and one of the worst moments of my young life. All my friends graduated on time, and I spent three months in summer school to get my diploma. I never saw any of those close friends again after that.

I share this heartbreaking story to remind us how easy it is to make the wrong choices. God has chosen us to be a vital part of His family. However, for us to be vessels that He can use, He continues to develop our faith.

Now, just because we stumble and fall does not mean that God will discard us. He is shaping us into the people He wants us to be. After my experience in high school, I learned that life doesn't have any shortcuts. Anything of value must be earned through hard work, dedication, and preparation.

More than thirty-five years have passed since those events, and I think twice (even three times) about that time before making similar choices. God is developing my Christian character and strengthening my faith. I don't need to cut corners as I put my faith and trust in Him.

Another one of my favorite people in the Bible to draw encouragement from is Joseph. His faith is an inspiration to me. God took him through several trials and tests to develop his faith as well.

He was the second youngest of twelve sons, and his father, Jacob, showed favor to him by giving him a beautiful coat of many colors. His brothers hated him with a passion (Genesis 37:4). Some of them even wanted to kill him. Eventually, they concocted a plan to get rid of their sibling.

After he was thrown in a pit by his brothers, Joseph was sold for twenty pieces of silver to traders on their way to Egypt. Can you envision being sold into slavery by your own family? Imagine Joseph's confusion at that moment.

God had blessed him with two dreams earlier in his life, indicating that someday his family would bow down to him. Instead, Joseph found himself dragged off to another country as a slave! "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the

bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there” (Genesis 39:1).

However, God stayed by Joseph’s side.

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field (Genesis 39:2–5).

Well, well, well. Things were certainly looking up for Joseph. Potiphar had put him in charge of his home. He was running things like a boss. Maybe those dreams would become a reality.

Even in the midst of trials, God is always with us. Everything that takes place in our lives has a purpose. There is no randomness with God. At this point in our faith development, God is making us stronger for what lies ahead.

God will test our hearts, my friend. Repeatedly, consistently, and yet so lovingly. His desire is not to harm us but to help us become more like Christ. The tests will be painful at times, but we will reap the benefit of a stronger faith.

Even though Joseph’s master thought so much of him that he put him in charge of his household, Potiphar’s wife had other ideas for Joseph. She thought Joseph was handsome and wanted to have sex with him. She repeatedly pursued him to sleep with her, despite his objections. Joseph wanted to be faithful to his master and not sin against God.

Potiphar’s wife attacked Joseph and accused him of trying to rape her.

He was then unjustly sent to prison, but once again, God stayed by his side. “So Joseph’s master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who were in the jail, so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it . . . The Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper” (Genesis 39:20–23).

Do you notice a theme here? Even though God is allowing Joseph to go through these painful experiences, God is *always* with him. He was prospering in the midst of these trials. As we spend difficult times in the furnace of affliction while God develops our faith, think of Joseph and what he experienced, and remember everything has a purpose.

After several years in prison and feeling as if he had been forgotten, Joseph was called before the pharaoh to interpret some dreams. After correctly interpreting the pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph was made second-in-command. He was now the prime minister over all of Egypt; he had been given complete control and was one of the most powerful men in the world.

Every painful trial and test he endured had a purpose. God was preparing Joseph for his ultimate station—to be the leader of a country that would provide food for the Israelites during the famine.

This was the birth of a nation, which led to his eleven brothers traveling to Egypt and unwittingly bowing before him to request food for their families. *Shazam!* God just brought everything full circle for Joseph.

James 1:2–4 is another one of my favorite Scriptures that I memorized after my stroke. It was difficult to understand at first, but God has clarified these truths for me since then. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

When I first read this verse, I was like, joy? Really, God? How can I have

joy in the midst of my painful trials? But God is not asking us as Christians to joke and laugh during our tests. He is asking us to have joy, knowing that the purpose of our trials is to draw us into a deeper relationship and commitment to Christ.

“Perfect and complete” does not mean that we will be without sin; only God has no sin. But this is the ultimate level of faith that God wants to develop in us. It is the type of faith that I desire to experience on a daily basis.

EXQUISITE FAITH

“Impeccable” and “perfect” are two words that define the word “exquisite.” Another word that applies when it comes to this level of faith is “refined.” God has us in the refining fire, developing our faith. He desires our faith to be exceptional so that we can accomplish everything He has planned for us.

That is why we must have joy in the midst of our trials. We know God is preparing us for something, and He wants what is best for us. He promises that all things will work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28, author’s paraphrase).

This Scripture is referring to working together for what God sees as good—not what we feel is good in our eyes. I’m sure Joseph did not think that being a slave and an accused rapist was good, but it was all part of God’s perfect plan for his life.

Exquisite faith is living in obedience without any doubting—a faith with full confidence in God, no matter our circumstances or our feelings. When we give ourselves over to our feelings and follow them, we usually end up in trouble. It is a constant battle for me to not live according to my desires.

I am reminded of my last job interview in 2005. The interviewers asked me to tell them my greatest strength and my greatest weakness. I said that was easy. They were the same thing—my emotions.

Just as I can quickly get fired up about a project and enthusiastically hit the ground running, I can also allow those same emotions to send me into a downward spiral, wanting to cancel every account I worked on that week.

We can't live a victorious Christian life by trusting our feelings. God wants us to live our lives trusting in Him. "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'the righteous man shall live by faith'" (Galatians 3:11).

An example of exquisite faith is shown by my main man, Abraham. God had blessed him and his wife Sarah with a child as promised. However, God later gave Abraham the ultimate test. He commanded him to take his son, Isaac, up on a mountain and sacrifice him on an altar. Say what?

Abraham awakened early the next morning to do as God commanded. It was a three-day journey to the place of sacrifice, so he had plenty of time to change his mind. However, Abraham pressed forward without any doubts. He was prepared to sacrifice the heir God had promised him. After seeing Abraham's willingness to obey Him, however, God intervened and prevented Abraham from killing Isaac.

Some additional examples of exquisite faith come to mind.

I think about Queen Esther whose faith in God shone brightly in the boldness she exhibited in saving the Israelites from extermination. Her story inspires me every time I read it.

Ruth's story also moves me. Her faith in God was courageous. She is the great-grandmother of King David and is forever in the lineage of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

I recall another woman who is sometimes forgotten. She does not even have a name, or at least, it is not mentioned in the Bible. She is known as the woman with an issue of blood. This woman had been bleeding for twelve years and was unable to receive any help from physicians, despite spending all her money.

She determined that if she could get through the massive crowds following Jesus, she would be relieved of her ailment. She was not even seeking to speak with Him. Now that is faith without doubt! "For she was saying to herself, 'If I only touch His garment, I will get well.' But Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' At once the woman was made well" (Matthew 9:21-22).

“Your faith has made you well.” Wow, those are words that I desperately want to hear from Jesus as I walk the Christian life. We must have determined courage as God develops our faith during the pain and suffering in our lives.

Part of God’s purpose in our pain and suffering is developing and strengthening our faith. So as we are crossing that bridge of faith and it continues to shake violently, let’s hold on tight and keep our eyes on Jesus. He is right there with us, holding our hands, helping our faith to grow stronger every day. “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so 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).

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Horace Williams Jr.

REFINING FIRE QUESTIONS

Where are you in your faith walk? Are you still in the infancy of your Christianity, living only in saving faith, or are you progressing to a more mature level?

What areas in your life are vulnerable to Satan and his followers as they watch your faith walk with Christ?

Where is your level of joy in the midst of your trials? Are you living by faith in God or by your feelings?

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2