

September 9, 2007 by Steve Brandon



True Religion

1 Peter 1:8-9

1. True Religion Rejoices
2. True Religion Trusts
3. True Religion Loves

In 1746, Jonathan Edwards published a book entitled, "A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections." Perhaps some of you are familiar with this book or even read it. In this book, Edwards detailed and described the marks of a genuine believer in Christ.

This book was written in the midst of controversy. In the decade before the publication of the book, America had experienced what is now known as "the Great Awakening." During that time, the Spirit of God moved greatly upon Colonial America. Many, who were either ignorant of the gospel, or not interested in the gospel were suddenly awakened to their sin and for their need for a savior. And many were converted to Christ. Jonathan Edwards had experienced this revival firsthand, as a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. He witnessed much of the amazing things that the Spirit of God accomplished in those days, even writing another treatise entitled, "A faithful narrative of the surprising work of God in the conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton, and the neighboring towns and villages of New Hampshire, in New England."

One of the most encouraging things that Jonathan Edwards witnessed was a genuine faith in God and a genuine love for God, where there was none before. It manifested itself in a variety of ways. Joy filled the hearts of many. The name of Jesus was on the tongues of many. Their worship was enthusiastic. People loved attending worship services. People loved to hear the word of God preached. Many joined the church. Many had a tremendous zeal to serve the Lord! Overall, it was a very encouraging time to be a Christian. Jonathan Edwards was particularly encouraged as he had witnessed the power of the Spirit as it swept across America.

And yet, over the years, something tragic happened. The fruit that at one time had appeared to be so beautiful in many, had withered away. To be sure, there were lasting effects from the Great Awakening that continued on for decades. However, there were some, who had fallen away from their previous zeal. In describing this phenomenon, Edwards wrote, "It is with professors of religion, especially such as become so in a time of outpouring of the Spirit of God, as it is with blossoms in the spring; there are vast numbers of them upon the trees, which all look fair and promising; but yet many of them never come to anything. ... It is the mature fruit which comes afterwards, and not the beautiful colours and smell of the blossoms, that we must judge by." ^[1]

What seemed at one time to be so promising, with so many flooding the church and exhibiting a mighty zeal for God, turned sour in some cases. As a result, many in the church came to despise religious zeal and enthusiasm that accompanies the Great Awakening, thinking that such displays of religion were false and fanciful. It was in this time, that Edwards felt the need to identify the characteristics of authentic faith. Thus, he wrote "A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections." In his preface, Edwards asked the question, "What is the nature of true religion? And wherein lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue which is acceptable in the sight of God?" ^[2] In other words, Jonathan Edwards was seeking to identify those things that characterized a genuine work of the Spirit of God upon the soul of man, which would never fade away. The main thrust of his treatise was to affirm that genuine religion will have "affections" for God. But, Edwards also pointed out that the mere existence of these characteristics in people didn't guarantee that they were experiencing a genuine work of the Spirit of God.

By "religious affections," Edwards demonstrated from Scripture how genuine faith will manifest itself. There will be a love for God. There will be a dependant trust in God. There will be a faith in God. There will be a joy in God. There will be a passion for God. There will be a whole-heart that wants to serve God. There will be a desire for God. There will be an enjoyment of God. Love for God will be abundant and fervent and earnest. These are what Edwards meant by religious "affections." They are lively and earnest and desirous of God.

Such "affections" are commanded in Scripture. They are commanded in passages such as Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Religious affections are commanded in Deuteronomy 10:12, "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." They are commanded in passages such as Romans 12:11, "Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord."

But, religious affections aren't only commanded in Scripture. They are also modeled time after time after time. Asaph cries out, "Whom have I in heaven, but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Ps. 73:25). In Psalm 42:1, the imagery is clear, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God." David says, "One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). Paul would say, "I have a desire to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23).

True religion is far from a cold exercise of affirming what is right and doing what is right. Christianity isn't about getting the doctrine right and behaving correctly. True religion always involves the affections. It means believing and it means feeling. It means believing what God has said. It means trusting in Him. It means longing for God and being passionate about God. It means "following hard" after God (Ps. 63:8).

When Jonathan Edwards sought to expound the true nature of genuine faith in his treatise, he chose 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 8, as his main verse. This is the very verse that we will begin with this morning. Following the lead of Edwards, my message this morning is entitled, "True Religion." Let's consider our text.

1 Peter 1:8-9

and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

By way of outline this morning, we shall see three characteristics of true religion. The first of these is ...

1. True Religion Rejoices

Admittedly, this is a very difficult place to begin an exposition, because, we are picking up Peter right in the middle of a thought. The word, "And" at the beginning of verse 8 is a clue that this is the case. And so, there is reason for us to review. I spoke last week of how it is that we are called to rejoice at all times. In verses 3-5, Peter describes for us our great salvation. When you come to embrace the magnitude of our salvation, your only response will be that of praise to God. We are saved by God's mercy alone. We are saved to a living hope. We have an inheritance which is perfect (imperishable, undefiled, and unfading). We are being protected by God's power until we reach that final day. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:3) who has worked such a salvation in we who believe.

Beginning in verse 6, Peter talks about the trials that come our way. But, rather than focusing upon the trials themselves, Peter focuses upon how his readers were responding to their trials. They were rejoicing. The salvation that God has given to us is so great, that the trials that we experience in the here and now ought to do little to dampen our joy in God. "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials" (1 Peter 1:6). Our salvation ought to so shadow our lives, that the momentary light affliction that we face can't diminish our joy in our salvation.

John Piper gave a good illustration of Peter's message. He wrote, "Christianity is not first theology, but news. It is like prisoners of war hearing by hidden radios that the allies have landed and rescue is only a matter of time. The guards wonder why all the rejoicing." ^[3] To the guards, such rejoicing would make no sense, only because the guards don't see the coming release of the prisoners. Oh, but for those who know about the coming release, such rejoicing makes all the sense in the world!

As we rejoice through these trials, God is ultimately glorified, because He demonstrates Himself to be worthy of our worship, no matter what befalls us. And that's how verse 7 ends, "the proof of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." See, it's not only in the good times that we ought to rejoice in God. It's also in the difficult times as well! Our salvation is so great, that it overshadows all of life. It is precisely here in verse 8 that our text picks up. And with these words, Peter will show how it is that people can actually rejoice through trials. People can rejoice through trials only when their faith is genuine. True religion will rejoice through trials. Look once again at verse 8, "and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

As we begin to dissect this verse, first of all, I want for you to notice how Peter describes the joy of those who are experiencing trials. It is a **superlative joy**. "You greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory." Please notice the superlatives that Peter has used in describing their joy. It's not merely that they **rejoiced**. It's not merely that they rejoiced **with joy**. It's not merely that they **greatly** rejoiced with joy. It's not merely that they greatly rejoiced with joy **inexpressible**. But, it's that they greatly rejoiced with joy inexpressible and **full of glory**!

This is not a cold, stoic resolve to endure the trials of life that were coming upon them. In facing these trials, it's not that these people stood their ground and took their sufferings like a man. Nor is it like they simply gave it over to fate, "what will be, will be." Rather, they were rejoicing through their trials. As real as their trials were, so real was their joy. It was vibrant and engaging and experiential! As real as the trials were, so real was their love for Jesus. Their joy greatly abounded!

Have you ever been this happy in your life? Think about the most joy-filled moment of your life. Perhaps when you won some award. Perhaps when you accomplished some great achievement. Perhaps when you were married. Perhaps when you witnessed the birth of your first child. Perhaps the day you believed in Christ. Perhaps the day you were baptized. Perhaps some gift you received on Christmas morning. Perhaps it's hard to pick one! But think of one. Can you in any way describe that moment as "greatly rejoicing with joy inexpressible and full of glory"? Those who received Peter's epistle were rejoicing like this in some of the most difficult circumstances that they ever faced! I find that amazing!

Last week, the title of my message was "rejoice always." We saw this come from verse 6, where those in Peter's day were rejoicing in the midst of their trials. The theme continues here in verse 8. These people are greatly rejoicing, even when in great distress. I believe that much of the reason behind their rejoicing came from their view of the big picture of life. They knew that these trials are only "for a little while" (verse 6). They were looking beyond their trials. This is what verse 9 talks about, "obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."

The salvation that Peter mentions in verse 9 is described in verses 3-5. It's the incredible inheritance that God is preparing us to enjoy someday. Through our trials, we can rejoice, because we know what awaits us on the other end.

2. True Religion Trusts

This comes in the middle of verse 8, "Though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him." The word "believe" is easily translated, "trust." True religion will trust the Savior, even though it has not seen fully.

John Newton gives a good word to demonstrate why it is profitable to trust the Lord. He writes, ...

There is a time coming when our warfare shall be accomplished, our views enlarged, and our light increased. With what transports of adoration and love shall we look back upon the way by which the Lord led us! We shall then see and acknowledge that mercy and goodness directed every step; we shall see that what our ignorance once called adversities and evils, were in reality blessings which we could not have done well without. Nothing befell us without a cause; no trouble came upon us sooner or pressed on us more heavily, or continued longer than our case required. Our many afflictions were, each in their place, among the means employed by divine grace and wisdom to bring us to the possession of that exceeding and eternal weight of glory which the Lord has prepared for His people. [\[4\]](#)

In saying these things, John Newton is saying, "There's a light at the end of the tunnel." As we approach that light, our trials in life will become clearer and clearer to us. When we reach the light, all things will become clear to us! I have often found that after the trials, things make more sense. Distance brings clarity.

Until that time when the purpose of the trials is clear to us, we need to trust in Jesus. Until that time, we need to believe in Jesus. We need to trust in the prophetic word made more sure, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:19). When you see the full light, you will see that all the troubles and trials that came upon you were really blessings in disguise. They demonstrated your insufficiency to solve things on your own. They brought you to a point of futility in trusting yourself. They forced you to look heavenward. To repeat Newton's quote, "by divine grace and wisdom [trials] bring us to the possession of that exceeding and eternal weight of glory which the Lord has prepared for His people." This is Peter's message: "Remain true! Remain steadfast. There is something that awaits you beyond this life that will bring sense to all of your trials and difficulties. seem insignificant. There is something great awaiting you! So, stay true in your faith. Trust the promises of God. They are sure guides to life."

In writing these words, Peter was acutely aware that his readers had never seen the things concerning which he spoke. The only way any of us have seen our ultimate salvation is through faith in what God's word says. The only way any of us have seen Jesus is through faith in what we have heard of Him. Peter mentions this fact in verse 8, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory." Those who received this letter were "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1:1). All of these regions were hundreds of miles away from Galilee, where Jesus spent the majority of his ministry. Jesus never came close to any of these regions. It would have been the rare person that ever traveled from these places into Jerusalem that might have had a chance to see Jesus. And yet, these people still loved their unseen Savior.

I believe that this is the key for understanding how exactly these people were able to rejoice in their trials. They had a great trust in their Savior. It didn't matter that they hadn't seen Him. They still had a deep love for Jesus. In this way, we can find direct application to us. None of us have ever seen Jesus. We have read about Him in the Bible. We have experienced Him through our salvation. But, we have never seen Him. Yet, we still need to trust Him.

We can often think that it would have been better to have seen Jesus, personally. "Oh, if only I could have seen Jesus and walked with Him. Then, I would believe in Him and be able to withstand the trials that come my way." Peter knew full well that mere sight of Jesus wasn't sufficient for getting you through the trials of life. Many who saw Jesus in flesh and blood never believed in Him. In fact, there were those who saw Jesus perform miracles, and yet, they hated Him. There were those who were initially interested in Jesus and began to follow Him, but when they saw and learned more of the real Jesus, they didn't want anything to do with Him.

When the multitudes here more of what Jesus had to say, "Many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). The closer they saw Jesus and the more they knew of Jesus, actually repelled them, rather than bringing them closer. Of course, you can also think about Judas. Though he had seen and experienced Jesus personally, it didn't help him to oppose the evil that he was exposed to. Mere sight of Jesus wasn't sufficient for faith, nor for getting through the trials of life.

Peter knew this first hand. He had seen Jesus in the flesh. He has been with him for three years of ministry. In chapter 5:1, he made it clear to his readers that he seen Jesus. He had even witnessed "the sufferings of Christ" firsthand. In his second epistle, Peter mentions the Mount of Transfiguration where he and James and John were "eyewitnesses of His majesty." Peter had even seen Jesus glorified! And yet, how well did that help him withstand the "various trials" of life? Not so well.

On several occasions, he failed his Lord. Being with Jesus didn't increase his faith. With Jesus in the boat, Peter worried about the boat sinking in the storm because of his lack of faith (Matt. 8:26). When Jesus invited him to walk upon the water, Peter began to sink in the water because of his lack of faith (Matt. 14:31). Although Peter had seen with his own eyes how Jesus fed the 5,000 people with a bit of fish and bread, he worried when he had forgotten to bring bread along in the trip across the sea (Matt. 16:8). When Jesus predicted that all of his disciples would fall away, Peter staunchly resisted this prediction: "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (Matt. 26:33). And yet, when he was in the courtyard, warming himself by the fire, Peter didn't even stand in his faith when a servant-girl identified him as being with Jesus (Matt. 26:69). Even after the crucifixion, Peter wasn't filled with faith, ready to take on the world with the gospel of Christ. Instead, he was hidden away in a room someplace with the doors locked for fear of the Jews (John 20:19).

But, after the resurrection, there was an incident that Peter observed in which he surely learned a bit about faith and sight. When Peter and the disciples reported to Thomas that they had seen Jesus alive, Thomas had said, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Well, the day arrived when Jesus and Thomas were in the same room together. Jesus said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27). Upon doing so, Thomas answered, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Jesus then commented, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29).

I believe that Peter learned well the lesson from Jesus that day. Those who have never seen, but have believed, are blessed. Those who have never seen, but have come to love Jesus, are blessed. One of the ways in which they are blessed is in their ability to overcome trials, as is the case here in 1 Peter. Their trust in their unseen Savior was sufficient to carry them through the trials that they faced. "Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29).

I've always been impressed with the verse immediately following the words of Jesus of the blessedness of those who haven't seen, but have believed. "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

We may never have the opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh, but we have a book that testifies about him. John says that in His gospel, he has excluded many of the extraordinary signs that Jesus did. But, the ones that John recorded are sufficient for us to believe. And in believing, we will have life! The Bible is sufficient for us to believe. We don't have to be scurrying about looking for the next best thing to believe. We have the Word of God. That's sufficient to bring about our faith. "Faith," as the writer to the Hebrews defines it, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Woven into the very fabric of the way in which God made the universe is that we wouldn't have the opportunity to fully see and experience all of the realities of heaven. Instead, God has given to us His Word to read. He has given preachers and teachers in the world to proclaim it. What we hear, we are to believe.

Christianity, fundamentally, is not a religion of the eye. Christianity is a religion of the ear. We hear the truth and believe it. God has not made it for us to see the reality and believe it. Jesus said, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:9, 43). When Christ wrote to the seven churches in Revelation, He closed each letter with these words: "To him who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Seven times! He didn't say, "He who has an eye, let him see!" It's "He who has ears, let him hear."

This is much different than many think. In one of the most broadest generalizations that can be made, this is the essence of much of Roman Catholicism. It is a religion of the eye, not the ear. In every Catholic church you enter, you will see front and center the crucifix, a representation of Jesus, dying upon the cross. It's intended to provoke a response to the sight of the worshiper. They are to see in the crucifix, a suffering savior, and thereby be aided in their faith.

In many Roman Catholic churches, around the church contain the twelve stations of the cross. These are pictorial representations of what took place in the life of Jesus as He approached Calvary. Again, the purpose is the same. The worshiper is to gaze upon these images and see and visualize the actual suffering of Christ, and thus, believe. There is a reason why so many Roman Catholics will flock to the sights of miracles. They want to catch a glimpse of the miraculous. Perhaps they too will see a tear fall from a statue!

Lest we think that it is only Roman Catholics who pursue their faith by sight, know that there are many Protestants who do so as well. "Seeing is believing" is the underlying philosophy of many of the modern-day faith healers. They believe that if you would but just see the miraculous, you too will believe. But, this is not the faith of the Bible.

Our walk in life is a walk of faith. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "We walk by faith, not by sight." A few verses earlier, Paul wrote, "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). This is Peter's point. As we live our lives, we aren't dominated by living by what we see. Rather, we are dominated by living by what we believe.

Fundamentally, it doesn't really matter that we haven't seen Jesus. What matters is whether you believe in Jesus. When pressures and difficulties come, our trials have a tendency to dominate our thinking. We see the difficulty before us and it seems insurmountable. Indeed, apart from a larger view of life, one that is trusting in the unseen, our trials may indeed be insurmountable. But, true religion can face the difficulties, precisely because it sets its gaze upon the unseen.

Perhaps you remember the story in 2 Kings 6, when Elisha and his attendant was in Dothan. The king of Aram had sent "chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city" (2 Kings 6:14). Elisha's attendant awoke and saw the "army with horses and chariots ... circling the city" (2 Kings 6:15). He said to Elisha, "Alas, my master What shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15). The problem was in front of him. It was very real. It caused him great anguish. And yet, I love how Elisha responded. He directed his servant to toward the unseen. He said, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). And then, he prayed, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17). "The LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17). There was a hedge of protection around Elisha that his servant knew nothing about, until God opened his eyes to see it. Such is the way in which true religion faces trials in life: it set's its affections upon the unseen. And the unseen in the case of our text this morning is the Lord Jesus. We don't see Him now. In fact, none of us have ever seen Him. And yet, it is our love for Him and our trust in Him that allows us to get through the trials of life with a joyful attitude.

(1) True religion rejoices. (2) True religion trusts. And finally, ...
3. True Religion Loves

Fundamentally, commands to be joyful in trials aren't going to help you in the day of trial. Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always" is good and all. But, the simple command is impossible to carry out without some further motivation or reasoning. But, genuine, religious affections will be of great help to you in your trial!

When you can say, "Whom have I in heaven, but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Ps. 73:25), the trials of life can't possibly get you down. When you pant for God like the thirsty deer pants for the water brooks, then you can rejoice through trials, knowing that the trials of life only cause you to hunger and thirst for God in greater ways (Ps. 42:1). When you have a singular passion to "dwell in the house

of the LORD all the days of [your] life, and to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple" (Ps. 27:4), the trials in life will seem quite insignificant. When you can genuinely say, "I have a desire to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23), then the trials of the here and now won't hold such a grip upon your life.

I remember growing up in my home. I loved our home. I had enjoyment in my home. I took great delight in being at home. Our home wasn't perfect, but it was an enjoyable place to be. I believe that it saved me from many other ills. When my friends tempted me to go out and do things with them, I didn't have much interest, because, I wanted to be in my home. If they would ever try to persuade me about the great fun that they were going to have, I didn't have to think too hard, knowing that I would have equal joy in my home.

In this way, your love for Jesus will help you during time of trial. Your religious affections will help you endure and "rejoice always."

Do you love Jesus? Perhaps you have a heart that wants to sing with Elizabeth Prentiss, "More love to Thee, O Christ, More love to Thee." The best way to love Jesus is to think about your redemption.

There was a day in the life of Jesus when He had been invited to the home of one of the Pharisees. This Pharisee became quite irritated at a woman who was at the feet of Jesus, crying uncontrollably, wetting His feet with her tears, wiping off the tears with her hair, and kissing the feet of Jesus. Jesus told a parable of two men who had been forgiven a debt. The conclusion was rightly drawn that the one who was forgiven more loved more. Jesus then said, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47).

When you see and understand the sin in your life that has been forgiven, you will love. And to the extent to which you see and understand the greatness of your own depravity, so also will you love your Savior.

Do you love Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus? If you do, then you will be able to "rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" when encountering the trials of life.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 9, 2007 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, p. 261.

[2] Ibid., p. 234. For both of these quotes by Jonathan Edwards, as well as the historical background to Edwards' treatise, I am indebted to Iain Murray's excellent biography, entitled, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography."

[3] John Piper, The Passion of Jesus Christ, p. 62.

[4] John Newton, Out of the Depths, p. 16.