

An Overview

When You Must Suffer

(1)

CONTEMPLATE this question: How would you react if you faced the kind of challenge that confronted Christians during the reign of Nero? What if we experienced a modern counterpart to the unleashed fury of Roman persecutors against the church in the first century? How would we respond if we came to that crucial moment of truth when we must either renounce Christ as Lord to live or confess Him and die? We hope we do not come to that point; but if we should, how would we fare?

This kind of question prepares us to look especially at 1 Peter, a letter which was probably written on the eve of the great Neronian persecution in the mid-sixties of the first century. One of the dominant themes of this book is suffering. Peter says, "Sufferings and trials are coming but do not count this strange to your calling" (4:12).

When Peter writes to these Christians scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bythinia, and Asia, he is addressing Christians who are feeling the persecuting fervor of Nero plus the ridicule and scorn of pagan neighbors.

We will look at the first chapter of this book, as we explore the question, "What should come to mind when suffering comes?"

THE MARVEL OF SALVATION (1:1-12)

When suffering comes it will help if one thinks of the marvel of salvation. In this chapter Peter shows us the greatness of our salvation. In verse 3 he sounds a note of praise much like Paul's in Ephesians 1:3:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Peter starts where Paul starts. When Carole, the French painter, painted those great landscapes, tremulous with beauty and light, he always painted the sky first. He started at the top. That is really where Peter and Paul start. We need to begin with God's grace and goodness.

What God Has Done About It

Both sides of salvation are discussed in this chapter. First of all consider God's side. In verse 2 Peter uses the word "grace," in verse 3 the word "mercy," and in verse 5 the expression "the power of God." God's part in salvation is seen in these great words. Salvation does not involve just faith, repentance, and baptism. These are necessary, indispensable conditions of pardon on man's part, but they constitute only man's part of salvation.

"Grace" means undeserved, unmerited favor. It comes from the word *karis* and means favor and forgiveness which cannot be earned. Someone has said, "Grace is restoring what we don't deserve, and mercy is withholding what we do deserve." Salvation has its ultimate foundation in the grace and mercy of God.

The prescript of this letter makes reference to the blood of Jesus Christ: "By the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood" (1:2). Peter also says, "Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life. . . ." (1:18-20). They were rescued from an empty, futile life, the traditional pattern of living that had been handed down to them. This redemption was effected by the precious blood of the Lamb, without spot or blemish. In John 1, John the immerser cries out, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Immediately the idea of the

Passover lamb of Exodus 12 comes to mind. Jesus was a pure sacrifice, the One who did not know sin "nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (2:22).

Peter says, "He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." He uses a word that relates to conception and birth.

What do blood, the resurrection, mercy, and grace have to do with salvation? That is the divine side. God took the initiative. He extends His mercy, bestows grace, offers cleansing and clemency through the blood and resurrection of Jesus.

What Man Must Do About It

Peter refers to our human responsibility as well. "And though you have not seen Him, you love Him." Those scattered Christians to whom Peter writes had not personally seen the Lord. Neither have we seen Him in His earth life. He has long since made His ascent back to the Ancient of Days. At the very high point of John's Gospel, Thomas is confronted with undeniable evidence of the resurrection (John 20). "Reach here your hand," the Lord challenged (John 20:27); and Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" He comes to the very point to which he is trying to bring His readers. Jesus pronounces a blessing, a benediction, upon those who have not seen Jesus but have believed. That would be true of Peter's readers in those remote areas, far removed from Judea.

The New Testament word translated *believed* means "trust," joyful trust in the Lord Jesus, trust conjoined with obedience. The human response to grace, mercy, the blood, and the resurrection of Christ is trust conjoined with obedience. That includes a confession of the mouth that Jesus is Lord, baptism into His death, and continued trust and obedience by walking in the light.

"You greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1:8). The ecstasy of eternity is in the heart of the one who has been made right with God, an ecstasy that cannot be fully expressed.

What is on the human side? Believing, rejoicing, and hoping.

In a sense salvation is the present possession of the faithful, obedient Christian. This is not to say that he cannot lose it. The same inspired

writer that speaks of the assurance in this chapter is the one who writes in 2 Peter 2:20-22:

For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. . . .

Salvation can be lost but it does not have to be. In 1 John, salvation and life are viewed as a present possession; but Peter also writes about the ultimate salvation: "Obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (1:9); or, as it is more clearly expressed in verse 5, "Who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." The process of salvation is not complete this side of ultimate glory. A blessed assurance can, and should, be ours right now, but ultimate salvation is not a settled issue. We must continue the race until the end. Continued faithfulness must be manifested even in the face of persecution and suffering.

I read a rather interesting illustration of salvation. A fire breaks out in a house which contains a treasured Stradivarius violin. A music lover becomes aware of the danger and, at certain peril to himself, rushes into the flames and brings out the Stradivarius. *That is salvation.* The word translated "salvation" in our New Testament is *soterion* which means deliverance. Then the music lover takes the violin to a craftsman who, with precision and tender care, repairs the instrument from the damage sustained in the fire. *That is salvation.* Then a great master takes that instrument into his hands and speaks to us with it. *That is salvation.*

Jesus snatches us out of our guilt and delivers us from sin. *That is salvation.* The wounds are healed and we are made new creatures. *That is salvation.* Then He begins to use us to His glory. *That is salvation.*

Paul says,

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service; even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save

sinners, among whom I am foremost of all
(1 Timothy 1:12-16).

Paul was saved from past sins though he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious; but that is not all. Paul further says, "He considered me faithful, putting me into service; even though I was formerly a blasphemer. . . ." Salvation includes purging from the past, healing, and power for the present; but He gives us a work to do. Paul calls his particular work "God's grace which was given to me" (Ephesians 3:7; Galatians 2:6-9).

The social gospel advocates say that our chief concern ought to be human ills right now. They would say they concern themselves with pie on the table today instead of pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by; but salvation as defined by Peter includes the ultimate reward, heaven.

Salvation includes an inheritance so wonderful that Peter can only describe it in terms of what it is not: it is incorruptible, it is undefiled, it fades not away. Old Testament Israel looked forward to a great inheritance: a land between the river of Egypt and the great river Euphrates; but that inheritance could be, in a sense, corrupted. The locust plagues, invading armies, and other forces tended to tarnish that inheritance. It could be defiled by their idolatry and by the Canaanites they failed to completely drive out; and ultimately, in a sense, it faded away.

Social gospel adherents miss the mark when they fail to see that the greatest service we can render to any person is the salvation of the soul from sin, a salvation that affects not just this life, but eternity.

The kind of change salvation brings means something to the persecuted not only now, but also in the future. Even if Nero brings you through the fire and puts you to death, you are guarded by the power of God, and your salvation is ready to be revealed in the last time. That hope is a vital part of the gospel.

What the Angels Are Doing About It

This great salvation was spoken of by the prophets. The angels themselves desire to look into it (1:12). Peter says the prophets spoke of Christ's suffering and glory without a full apprehension of the predictive statements they made (1:10). "It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you . . ." (1:12). In Hebrews 11:13 we are told,

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Peter's statement concerning the prophets is similar to the Hebrew writer's regarding ancient Old Testament worthies. They did not minister unto themselves. Their ministry of prophecy concerning Christ was actually for the heirs of salvation in the Christian age. God's plan in their day was something of a mystery.

It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven,—things into which angels long to look (1:12).

If I did not know anything else about this salvation, I would know of its greatness because the Old Testament prophets spoke of it and searched diligently concerning what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did testify when He spoke of the suffering of Christ and the glories which followed. It must be a great salvation because angels desire to look into it. *To peer into it* the text might be rendered. One old hymn has it:

The angel army of the sky
Looks down with sad and wondering eyes
To see the approaching sacrifice.

Paul also says the very existence of the church makes known to principalities and (angelic) powers in the heavenly places God's manifold wisdom:

In order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:10, 11).

THE MINISTRY OF SUFFERING (1:6-9)

When suffering comes think of the ministry of suffering. Peter says that our faith when strengthened by suffering is more precious than gold when it is tried by fire.

Its Reality

Peter affirms the certainty of suffering: "Be-

loved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (4:12). Suffering is not foreign to the Christian's calling. That was true then and it is true now. The opposition may take a different form today, but this passage has not been annulled. Paul also said, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Its Results

In chapter 4, we are reminded of the power of suffering to purge and purify a life: "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin" (4:1).

Peter, James, and Paul speak of the strange combination of joy and affliction. Notice 1:6, 7:

In this 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.

Peter refers to Christians rejoicing though beset by manifold trials. James says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" (James 1:2). Paul says, "We also exult in our tribulations; knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance" (Romans 5:3). Paul also said, "You . . . receive the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Suffering, affliction, and joy!

THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION (1:13-25)

When trouble comes, it will help us to think of the meaning of sanctification. From verse 13 to the end of the chapter emphasis is given to sanctification or holiness. Peter issues a call to holiness: "Be holy yourselves also in all your behavior" (1:15).

The Cause of It

What is the basis for this call? The nature of our God. The heavenly creatures incessantly cry out praise to the holiness of God (Isaiah 6:3). Leviticus, with all of its legislation, was intended to show that God is holy and man is unclean and

needs a savior. A sacrifice was needed for him. God sustains a special relationship with His people. Therefore, He expects them to be a unique people. Much of what Peter says in this passage alludes to Old Testament concepts about God's chosen, set apart, covenant people.

Why are we to be holy? First, we are in a unique relationship with a holy God. We are to reflect His holiness. Second, we have been redeemed!

Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, . . . (1:18-20).

Our emancipation from spiritual servitude has come through the cross of Christ. We are to be different.

The Conduct of It

This passage points to a definite kind of conduct. It starts where all patterns of speech and action must start—with our minds. First Peter 1:13 says, "Therefore, gird up your minds for action, keep sober in spirit. . . ." "Gird up" is a figurative expression, Peter, metaphorically, is saying, "Get a mastery over your mind and moods and be sober." This is not just a prohibition against drunkenness, though that is implied, but it urges overall sobriety in which your faculties are in control.

Holiness involves a mental discipline. We will not want to read or look upon some things; some thoughts we will try to rule out (Philippians 4:8). We have been purified, and we seek to remain pure by walking in the light (1 John 1:7).

We are to pass the time of our sojourn in fear (1:17). This is not slavish dread and terror, but a sense of awe and respect. It is a fear that we might grieve our Father, a fear that we might fall short of the ultimate glory and inheritance.

Verse 22 says our souls have been purified by obedience. The implication is that a continued purity is seen in the Christian's life. This purification results in unfeigned love of the brethren.

The Word of the Lord "which lives and abides forever" is contrasted with the fleeting nature of this life (1:24, 25). That indestructible and abiding Word has been planted in our hearts. A new life of holiness has come forth. It

is a life of rigorous mental discipline, a life of sojourning, a life in which holiness finds expression in loving one another with a pure heart fervently.

"Hope" is implied in the expressions "an inheritance" and "reserved in heaven for you." In "hope" and "heaven," we see a future we must never lose sight of. Christianity provides the best way to live right now. It has the promise of the life which now is (1 Timothy 4:7, 8), and of the life which is to come.

Peter knows some of the readers may suffer severe persecution and even death. They may suffer under Nero in the sixties or later under Domitian in the nineties. So he says, "Even if you are in manifold sufferings for a time, rejoice in the proving of your faith and let your hearts be high with hope." The Christian is like a bird poised for flight. One day he will instinctively and unerringly go to the One who has redeemed him, to be His forever. Peter knows that hope, like nothing else, will lift the hearts of those who are threatened with suffering. The hopeful heart cannot be totally discouraged.

CONCLUSION

We pray that the opposition that we face may not take the same form that it did in the first century, but nothing can motivate us more powerfully, serve as a greater spiritual stimulus and spur, than the realization that we have an inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and fades not away. This hope is guarded by the power of God through faith and is ready to be revealed at the last time. It is as sure as God Himself.

Can you lay claim to this assurance? If suddenly the brittle thread that holds you here should snap and you should be carried quickly and swiftly into eternity, could you go without fear and with full hope because you are in Him and have been begotten again unto a living hope by the resurrection of the dead? If not, I do not have the words to convey adequately the sense of urgency that ought to fill your heart and move you to immediate action to lay hold of that great hope. If you are not a Christian you need to be begotten again by that Word that lives and abides forever (John 3:5; Mark 16:15, 16).

—Avon Malone

Applying Scripture to Life

Looking Out for Number One

Robert Ringer propagates the gospel of individualism in his book *Looking Out for Number One*. He writes, "Our primary objective is really to be as happy as possible and all other objectives great and small are only a means to that end"; but the Christian seeks holiness, not happiness.

Our Paths in Life

Students wear paths across the campuses of universities, beating down the grass, defying all barriers, ignoring all side-walks. Student paths have two things in common: they are in-

variably the shortest distance between two points, and they are straight.

Cow paths are neither. They always wander and turn a little, and never go straight to the object.

Humans take the straight route, intent not on the journey but on the destination. We largely miss the trip, thinking ahead to a future time.

Cows do not think ahead, and perhaps see more of the countryside. Their paths are unhurried, and more fun.

Curtis K. Stadtfeld,
From the Land and Back

Values and Motivations

I had just completed a sur-

vey on the values and motivations of college students at campuses in the Southeastern United States. One striking discovery of the survey was that there was little internal sense of cause or duty among students. Primary motivations centered on personal enjoyment and the development of job-related skills.

Stephen D. Eyre,
Defeating the Dragons of the World

Satisfying Our Needs

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in the thirteenth century, "Money no more satisfies the hunger of the mind than air supplies the body's need for bread."