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HOPE AND HOLINESS IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Introduction & 1 Peter 1:1-2

By

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1 Peter Lesson 1

Hope And Holiness In A Hostile World Introduction & 1 Peter 1:1-2

After an extensive tour of the United States some years ago, the late, well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he saw as the greatest defect among American Christians. He replied, "They have an inadequate view of suffering."

I think his observation still holds true. If it were not so, how could American Christians even give a moment's credence to the ridiculous idea that it is always God's will for believers to be healthy and wealthy? When we visited Macau in 1987, I asked a young woman from mainland China if she had heard of that teaching in China. She laughed softly, shook her head, and replied, "No, that teaching wouldn't get very far in China."

But an inadequate view of suffering is not just a problem for those who think that it's always God's will to give us a trouble-free life. I find it to be a problem among many Christians undergoing trials. Some face debilitating illness, but instead of submitting to God, they grow bitter and complain, "Why me?" Some put up with intolerable marriages for a while, but then bail out with the excuse, "Don't I have a right to some happiness?" Others look back on a childhood in which they were abused and angrily complain, "Where was God when I needed Him? What kind of God would allow an innocent child to suffer like I did?"

All these people share in common an inadequate view of suffering. Because of their bitterness toward God, they are not in submission to Him. They are vulnerable to temptation and sin. Others who suffer may submit to God, but it's more like glum resignation than grateful trust. They're depressed because of their problems, perhaps even to the point of suicide. They've lost hope.

What all these people need is both hope and holiness in a hostile world. That is to say, they need to hear and apply the message of 1 Peter. The apostle wrote this letter to Christians scattered throughout what today is northern Turkey. He probably wrote

from Rome (referred to in code as “Babylon” [5:13]) just before Nero’s fierce persecution of Christians in that city in A.D. 64. But the pressure was already on many who held to this new belief in Jesus as God in human flesh, who died on a Roman cross and was raised from the dead. Believers were being slandered (2:12; 3:14-16; 4:14). Gentile Christians were reviled by their former partners in sin (4:4). These Christians needed to know how to handle these trials that came upon them on account of their seeking to follow Christ.

Peter points them to Christ, our great example, who endured unjust suffering from a hostile world, but who maintained both hope and holiness by submitting Himself to the Father’s sovereign purpose. That’s the message of 1 Peter:

In spite of a hostile world, Christians can live
in hope and holiness by submitting to God.

We all need this practical message because, in one form or another, we all face trials. Peter holds out no promise that following Jesus will exempt a believer from hardship. Far from it! He says that we should not be surprised at fiery ordeals, as if they were abnormal (4:12). But he points us to Christ and to the glory promised us in heaven. If we will learn the lessons packed into this great letter, we will be strengthened and encouraged as we live for Christ in this hostile world.

After an opening greeting, the book falls into three parts (I’ve adapted this outline from J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* [Zondervan], p. 303):

Introductory greeting: Scattered as aliens, but chosen and obedient (1:1-2).

1. The living hope: How to cultivate it (1:3-2:10).

The living hope is cultivated by knowing Christ as the living Savior (1:3-21); the living Word (1:22-2:3); and, the living Stone (2:4-10).

2. The alien life: How to live it (2:11-3:22).

The alien life (2:11-12) is lived as holy people in submission: as Christian citizens (2:13-17); as Christian servants (2:18-25); as

Christian mates (3:1-7); as Christian witnesses who are wronged (3:8-22).

3. The fiery trial: How to endure it (4:1-5:11).

Christianity may be a life of fiery trials, but we can endure such trials purposefully as holy people (4:1-6); soberly, as serving people (4:7-11); joyfully, as expectant people (4:12-19); and, corporately, as humble people (5:1-11).

Concluding greetings: This is God's true grace; stand firm in it! (5:12-14).

Most of the major themes of the book are in kernel form in the opening greeting (1:1-2):

1. Christians live in a hostile world.

Peter addresses his book "to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (the northern regions of modern Turkey). These churches may have been founded by converts from the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached (Acts 2:9); by Peter on missionary journeys into the area; by converts of the Apostle Paul from nearby regions where he preached (he was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go into Asia and Bithynia [Acts 16:6-7]); or, by some combination of these.

"Scattered" is the Greek *diaspora*, used to refer to the scattering of the Jews outside of Palestine (John 7:35; James 1:1). Peter calls these Christians the diaspora, or scattered people of God. Judging from the many Old Testament references in this epistle, there must have been many Jewish believers in these churches. But, also, many references point to many Gentiles (1:14 18; 2:9-10, 18 [servants]; 4:1-4).

"Aliens" (used also in 2:11) contains two inherent ideas: That we are both foreigners and temporary residents. As foreigners, we do not belong to this evil world. In Jesus' words, we are in the world, but not of it (John 17:13-16). We should not speak its language or follow its customs. Our behavior should be distinct from the residents of this world.

Have you ever traveled to a foreign country where you stood out obviously as a foreigner? In 1987, when we went to China, we spent an afternoon walking the back streets of Guangzhou, where

we didn't see any other Westerners. People stared at us and we stared back. We found their customs interesting, but very different from our own. Instead of buying dead poultry and fish, shrink-wrapped in plastic, the Chinese buy live chickens, ducks, and fish. The birds are squawking and the fish are gasping for their last breath as they carry them from the market. While their custom is no doubt more nutritious, I must confess that I was a foreigner, because I wouldn't know what to do if my dinner was still alive when I brought it home!

One of Peter's favorite words is the Greek word, *anastrophe*. He uses it six times in 1 Peter (1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16) and twice in 2 Peter (2:7; 3:11). It is only used five other times in the entire New Testament. It means "way of life" or "behavior." The point is, as Christians our way of life, our conduct and behavior should stand out like a foreigner stands out in China. We're supposed to be different, as the King James translates 2:9, "a peculiar people." (You're probably thinking, "Yes, I've met many peculiar Christians!") But it doesn't mean weird, but distinct. Christians should stand out as godly people in a corrupt, ungodly world.

Peter makes it clear, as Jesus did, that we are not to become hermits, cloistered from the world, but rather to live commendably in it (2:12, 15, 20-21; 3:13-17; 4:19; 5:9). Nor are we to live apart from the church, as individuals, but in community with other Christians as the people of God (1:22; 2:4-10; 3:8-9; 4:8-11, 17; 5:1-5, 9, 13-14). As someone put it, "We are not to live in the world and go to church, but to live in the church and go to the world." So the word "alien" means that we are foreigners in this evil world.

The second sense of "alien" is that we are temporary residents. We're not to be settlers, but pilgrims, looking for our real home in heaven. Peter brings this out numerous times: 1:6, "for a little while"; 1:17, "during the time of your stay upon earth"; 2:11-12, you are aliens now, but the day of visitation is coming; 4:2, "the rest of the time in the flesh," with the day of judgment to follow (4:5); and, 5:10, "suffered for a little while."

The ideas of hope, heaven, the return of Jesus Christ, and the future glory are all prominent in 1 Peter: 1:3-5, 7, 13, 21; 2:12; 3:5, 15; 4:5, 7, 13, 17; 5:1, 4, 6 ("proper time"), 10. Also, Peter repeat-

edly makes the point that unbelievers will be judged by God: 1:17; 2:7-8, 12, 23; 3:12, 18-20; 4:5, 17-18).

All of this is most practical to those who are suffering, especially when you look around at wicked people who seem to be doing quite well, and wonder, "Is it worth it to follow Christ?" Sometimes people mock Christianity as a "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die" religion. Clearly, it is! Paul says that if it's not, "if we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

I'm thankful for modern medicine, but there's a sense in which it has done us a great disservice. Years ago, people didn't need to be convinced of the shortness of life and the reality of eternity. Most families lost several children in death. Many adults died of things that now can be healed. Death was a constant reminder of the fact that this life is not all there is. Eternity is ahead. Though we suffer and the wicked prosper now, a day is coming when it will all be made right, just as Jesus Christ promised.

But we often mistakenly assume that because medicine can extend someone's life for a few years, we escape from the reality of eternity! No, says Peter, we're aliens—foreigners, temporary residents—here on earth. We live in a hostile world now, but we're looking for that great day when our Savior returns from heaven for us! Therefore,

2. Christians can live with hope in this hostile world.

People going through trials need hope. Peter begins (1:3) by saying that God "has caused us to be born again to a living hope." He instructs us to fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:13). Since Jesus has been raised from the dead, our faith and hope are in God (1:21; see also 3:5, 15).

Biblical hope is not like worldly hope. Worldly hope is uncertain, at best. We say, "I hope my investment will be profitable." There's a lot of anxiety and not much certainty in that kind of hope! But biblical hope is certain, though not yet realized, because it is backed by the God who cannot lie.

It's as if you and I had both missed the World Series. I heard which team won, but you hadn't. We sit down to watch a video-

tape of the final game, and I say to you, "Would you like to put a friendly bet on the game?" You'd be a fool to make that bet! Why? Because even though I don't know exactly how the game will develop, I am certain about the final outcome. And Christians may not know exactly how the events of life will unfold, but we know for certain whose side is gonna win. We can be sure of the glory that awaits us in heaven. That's biblical hope!

In the opening greeting, Peter gives three reasons we can live with hope in this hostile world:

A. We can have hope because we've been chosen by God.

In the Greek text, the word "chosen" comes right after "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ." It is put at the start for emphasis. Peter wants us to know from the outset that our relationship with God does not depend on our weak grasp on Him, but rather on God's sure grip on us. Our salvation is not our doing; it is God's doing! Thus we can submit to God during times of trial because He is sovereign in saving and keeping His own. This comforting theme of God's sovereignty runs through the whole book (1:3-5, 11-12, 20; 2:7-10; 3:17, 22; 4:11, 19; 5:10-11).

This greatly comforting truth, that God has chosen us for salvation, has been undermined by those who say, "Yes, but it says that God chose us according to His *foreknowledge*." They say that election means that God peered down through history, saw who would believe in Him and put them on His list.

But a moment's thought will show how inadequate that view is. It makes the eternal, sovereign plan of God depend upon the will of man. It makes God into a heavenly wimp who happened to be omniscient. So He looked at the future and said, "Oh, I do hope that Saul of Tarsus will believe in Me, because he would make such a nice apostle. Oh, good! He is going to decide for Me! I'll put him on my list of the elect." But Paul made it clear that God had set him apart even from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15).

Also, such a view turns the grace of God into merited rather than unmerited favor. If election just means that God knew in advance who would believe, then He did not sovereignly choose them apart from their choice of Him, but because of it. But Scripture is clear that God chose whom He willed, simply because

of *His* choice (Rom. 9:11, 16, 18). The word “foreknowledge” means that God knew in the special sense of choosing His people before the foundation of the world. The idea of foreordination is implied in “foreknowledge” (1 Pet. 1:20; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:29).

B. We can have hope because we’ve been saved by the Triune God.

Peter assumed that his readers accepted the Trinity. He doesn’t stop to explain or defend it; he just states that we were chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that we may obey Jesus Christ. God is one God who exists in three coequal, eternal persons, the same in substance, but distinct in subsistence. Each person of the Godhead has a role in our salvation. We can have hope because our salvation depends on this great Triune God.

C. We can have hope because we enjoy God’s multiplied grace and peace.

“Grace and peace” is a form of Christian greeting, but it is much more. God’s grace was the motivating factor in Peter’s life, as it should be in every Christian’s life. He uses the word in every chapter of this book, ten times in all (1:2, 10, 13; 2:19-20; 3:7; 4:10; 5:5, 10, 12). The first word of the epistle, “Peter,” illustrates God’s grace in a most personal way. The unstable Simon, who failed miserably on a number of occasions, but most terribly when he denied the Lord, became Peter (the Rock), greatly used by God as an apostle. “Peace” is the inner result of experiencing God’s grace.

The words “Peter, an apostle,” contain a fine balance that we must maintain. “Peter” illustrates God’s grace, that He forgives our sin and showers us with blessings we do not deserve. “Apostle” means “one sent under authority,” and shows that the things Peter writes to us are not helpful suggestions, but divine commandments. There is no contradiction between “grace” and “obedience” to God’s commands.

We’ve seen that Christians live in a hostile world as aliens; but, they can live with hope. Finally,

3. Christians can live with holiness in a hostile world.

Holiness and obedience are major themes in 1 Peter (1:2, 14-17, 22; 2:1, 11, 24; 3:2, 6, 8-9; 4:1-11, 15-17). In the introduction these themes are brought out in the respective works of the Spirit and of Jesus Christ in our salvation.

First, Peter says that we are chosen “by the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” (The same phrase is used in connection with election in 2 Thess. 2:13.) The word “sanctifying” means “setting apart” and looks here at the initial work of God’s Spirit in taking a believer out of the world and setting him apart unto God in the community of God’s elect people (Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 11). But, the word also has an active, ongoing sense that points to the process by which the Spirit progressively separates the believer unto God, in cooperation with our submission and active participation in the process (Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Peter and Jude* [Baker], pp. 36-37, 38). Thus holiness is both positional and progressive. It involves both the Spirit’s sovereign work and our willing cooperation.

Next Peter says that we are chosen “unto obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ” (literal translation). Grammatically, the word “obedience” stands alone and refers to our initial acceptance of the gospel, what Paul and Peter both call “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; 1 Pet. 4:17). The Bible is clear that saving faith is obedient faith. In fact, “obedience” is often used to describe saving faith (John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Rom. 10:16; 15:18; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 2:8; 3:1). We are saved by faith, but saving faith is not mere assent, but rather active belief that always results in ongoing obedience to God.

The phrase “sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ” stems from Moses’ sprinkling the Israelites with blood at the initiation of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod. 24:3-8). The Book of Hebrews applies this to Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice of Himself in inaugurating the New Covenant (Heb. 9:19-28). Thus Peter is referring to the initial cleansing from sin that takes place when the blood of Christ is applied to our hearts when we commit ourselves by faith to follow Him. “Obedience” looks at our part; “sprinkling” looks at Christ’s part.

As with the word “sanctifying,” the word “sprinkling” is an active noun that also contains the idea of an ongoing process.

Though the blood of Christ cleanses us from all our sins at the moment of salvation, there is also a repeated cleansing applied to our hearts as we confess our sins (1 John 1:7, 9).

Thus the idea here is that the Christian life is both an initial and an ongoing process of separation from sin and separation unto God. It is first and foremost the work of God's Spirit and of Jesus Christ on our behalf, but also it involves our active obedience.

Conclusion

Another key word in 1 Peter which relates to having both hope and holiness in this hostile world is the word "submit" (2:13, 18; 3:1, 5, 22 [used of angelic submission to Christ]; 5:5). It's not a popular word in our day of "rights" and "assertiveness," where everyone is trying to avoid pain and seek fulfillment at all costs. But it is a key to having a proper view of suffering. When we face trials, we have a choice. We can assert ourselves and complain about how unfair things are and look for the easiest and quickest way out. Or, we can submit to the sovereign hand of God, knowing that He has chosen us for salvation and saved us by His mighty power.

We can respond to trials like an egg or like a potato. An egg goes into boiling water soft, but comes out hard. A potato goes in hard and comes out soft. I'd like you to ask yourself, "How am I responding to the trials God has sovereignly allowed into my life? Am I submitting to God or resisting Him?" If we submit to Christ, He will soften our hearts and give us both hope and holiness as we live in this hostile world.

Discussion Questions

1. What examples have you seen of Christians having an inadequate view of suffering?
2. What does "separation from the world" mean in practical terms?
3. Does the doctrine of election comfort or confuse you? Why?
4. Does submission to God in trials mean passive fatalism? What does it mean?

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