

Treasuring the Book

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 10: The Best of Books
Scripture: 1 Peter 1:1-12

Sooner or later all of us suffer.

None of us are exempt. We may differ in our politics, our job, our financial situation or our skin color but suffering is the universal language. There is a wise Spanish Proverb that says, "There is no home without its hush," meaning that every family will experience the stillness that descends at a time of bereavement, job loss, illness or personal tragedy. That hush is being felt in many homes in Japan today following the devastating earthquakes last Friday. Our hearts go out to them.

This theme of suffering is the reason for Peter's first letter. He is writing to afflicted believers.

They have been persecuted because of their faith in Christ and as a result they have been scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

They are refugees in the area of modern Turkey.



The same thing is happening in Libya as a result of the Civil War that is going on between forces loyal to Gaddafi and those who want to remove him. People are streaming out of the country to avoid the conflict. Italy is bracing itself for a large wave of refugees.

Peter is speaking into this sort of situation.

Nero was ruling in Rome.

He has unleashed a plague of persecution on Christians. They have been forced to flee from major cities like Rome and Jerusalem.

So what do you say to people who have lost everything? Who have had to leave their home behind and have witnessed members of their family and church killed? We all recognize that it is hard to be happy at such a time and yet Peter insists that these Christians "Greatly rejoice."

How is this possible?

We want to know for we too suffer.

The answer is found in The Best of Books which we treasure all the more in times of turmoil.

So please turn to 1 Peter chapter 1 in your Bible and take out your message outline as we look at the tremendous theme of **TREASURING THE BOOK.**

Peter begins with a beautiful benediction to these suffering saints when he writes, **"Grace and peace be yours in abundance." (v 2)**

Isn't that exactly what we need when life is bad and we are sad? We long for grace and peace in abundance.

Peter shows that we can have grace and peace in abundance because of four treasures we possess as the people of God.

The apostle doesn't want these battered believers to focus on what they have lost but on what they have in Christ.

First we can have grace and peace in abundance because of **OUR DIVINE IDENTITY.**

Peter does something very clever in his opening greeting.

He sandwiches their earthly troubles between two great heavenly truths.

These serve as arms around their anguish.

They are God's elect (arm one), **strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,** (arm two) **who have chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father."** (v 1-2)

Here is the point that Peter is making.

God has chosen them.

They may be strangers in the world.

They may be unknown to the people around them but they are known and loved by God.

He is aware of their location and situation.

There are some theologians who doubt that God has foreknowledge but Peter is not one of them.

This doctrine of God's foreknowledge should be a great encouragement to us.

It means that all the troubles we face as believers are not arbitrary or even accidental.

They have passed through the hands of a loving Father for a specific purpose that we will discover in a moment.

The word Peter uses for foreknowledge is **prognosis.**

Now doctors know about diagnosis and prognosis.

Once they are aware of the patient's problem they devise a plan of action that will restore them.

The Great Physician does the same thing.

He diagnoses the problem of our suffering as strangers in the world. His prognosis is to call us to himself.

Peter reveals the magnitude and majesty of our divine identity as he emphasizes the Trinitarian nature of our faith. We **“Have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through, the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” (v 2)**

Peter’s message is profound.

He knows that when we lose our possessions we lose something of our personality.

So Peter says “don’t forget who you are.

You are God’s property.

The Father has chosen you, the Spirit is sanctifying you. And the Son has saved you.”

We have been sprinkled by his blood.

That means we have been cleansed from sin.

Because of that we can live a life of obedience.

That is especially important in times of suffering when the devil will try to tell us that God doesn’t care about us and has abandoned us.

So Peter puts our pain in perspective by focusing on our position in Christ.

We have not been forgotten but we are forgiven.

Next Peter shows we can have grace and peace in abundance because of **OUR LIVING HOPE.**

Peter now winds up for a spectacular doxology.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you.” (v 3-4)

These believers may be facing death but they do so with a living hope. That hope is built on the resurrection of Jesus. Now think what that means.

This hope isn’t based on positive thinking or an optimistic personality or even a favorable outcome.

Rather it is given birth through the resurrection.

That is significant because the resurrection followed the death of Jesus when everything seemed hopeless.

It appeared that evil had triumphed and the dream of a new day had died.

But appearances can be deceptive.

Jesus burst out of that tomb on Easter morning and that greatest of all miracles gives us hope in the time of our own tragedy.

The resurrection of Jesus makes possible two comforting realities.

First, it makes possible our new birth as children of God and second it makes possible the inheritance that we shall enjoy one day in heaven.

These can never be taken from us by the circumstances of life for our relationship with Jesus is an eternal one.

Third Peter shows that we can have grace and peace in abundance because of **OUR GENUINE FAITH.**

“Who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” (v 5)

Faith has its rewards and here we learn that we are protected by the most efficient security system available which is the power of God.

This means we can never be lost in the process of suffering. No disorder, no disease not even death itself can steal away God’s ultimate protection over our lives.

That is why Peter can now say, **“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (v 6-7)**

Now we see one of the reasons why God allows his people to suffer. It is so that our faith may be proved genuine.

But does this really work?

Does suffering lead to sanctification?

The current edition of *Leadership Magazine* reports a study on how people grow as Christians.

It reveals that the primary path to maturity is through suffering.

The type of suffering varied.

It might be divorce, or cancer, the death of a loved one, or bankruptcy.

People reported, “That’s when I found my faith really mattered. That is when Jesus revealed himself and I was able to praise him. It was when I was in the furnace of affliction that one like the Son of God was there beside me.”

John Ortberg, who wrote the article, said the results were rather humbling for him as a pastor.

People didn’t say it was a sermon or a small group or a mission trip or a service opportunity that made them develop as a disciple. Those things help, but it was suffering that caused the growth.

Now this is not automatic for suffering in and of itself is not redemptive.

Suffering has to be interpreted.

But not all interpretations are helpful.

That is why some people grow bitter rather than better.

Others run from God rather than to him.

But if we remember our divine identity, our living hope and our genuine faith then there is a very good chance that we will make significant spiritual progress during these difficult days.

I have noticed that is true in this congregation.

I listen to your faith stories from the pulpit and your conversations in the counseling room and I hear Peter's words echoed again and again and I am so glad that, **"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy." (v 8)**

In his book *The Problem of Pain* C.S. Lewis points out that we are a divine work of art.

We are a painting that God is making.

We are not just a sketch that God dashes off in a minute. We are his life's work, his great love.

That is why he takes endless trouble over us for his ultimate goal is that we will be perfect.

So on the canvas of our lives there would be scenes of suffering because that is how our faith becomes genuine.

Finally Peter shows us that we can have grace and peace in abundance in the midst of suffering because of **OUR AMAZING SALVATION**.

He writes, **"For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.**

It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven." (v 9-12)

Peter uses two biblical illustrations to demonstrate how amazing our salvation really is.

First he tells us that **prophets ponder it**.

The Old Testament prophets who foresaw the coming of Christ and predicted his sufferings on the cross and the glory of his resurrection did not fully grasp the magnitude of the salvation we now enjoy.

That means that you and I, who live this side of the cross are in a more privileged position than Isaiah, or Jeremiah or Daniel, or Ezekiel.

They pondered Christ but we possess him.

Christ is the end of prophesy and the goal of history.
 His is the suffering that brought salvation.
 His is the glory that brings the new creation.
 Jesus is therefore not simply the one of whom the prophet speaks.
 He is the one who speaks through the prophets.

Peter comes full circle here.
 He began by referring to us as God's elect.
 He now explains how we were chosen.
 The Holy Spirit was sent by heaven to the individuals who imparted the gospel to us
 so that we could believe in Christ.

If you are a Christian, think of that person who told you about Jesus. Picture their
 face in your mind.
 For me it was a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force. His name was Dickie Bell. I
 was 16 years old at a camp run by the Officers Christian Union.

The person who shared the gospel with you may be a parent, or a pastor, an
 evangelist, a Sunday school teacher. The Holy Spirit was sent by heaven to work
 through that person to make known to you God's amazing salvation.
 That fact can sustain you in sorrow.
 If God was faithful then, he will be faithful now.

The second reason our salvation is amazing is that **angels are in awe over it.**
 Peter notes, **"Even angels long to look into these things." (v 12)**

The word that Peter uses to describe the angels looking is the same word that was
 used to describe Peter and John on Easter morning as they stooped down to peer
 into the mystery of the empty tomb.

So here is the scene in heaven.
 The angels watch in amazement as the eternal Son takes off his glory, lays it aside
 and comes to earth.
 They hang over the walls of heaven looking down to see Jesus born of a virgin,
 growing up in Galilee, dying on a
 cross and rising on the third day.

Angels know about the holiness of God in a way that we don't. Their knowledge of
 the judgment of God, the majesty of God, and the sheer power of God is unique.
 But they don't know what it is like to be saved.

They have never been saved for they are servants, not sons. They have never
 known what it is to be so loved that the Son of God would die on a cross for them.
 They don't know that. But we do.

The angels have vast stores of wisdom and experience but compared to ours their knowledge has severe limitations. To look at the angels in this way is to sense something of our amazing salvation.

Peter's point is that there is suffering now but glory to come. He wants to encourage Christians to face the first and look for the second. The sequence of our lives follows the sequences in Jesus' life. He suffered first then entered into his glory. So must we.

This pattern of suffering and glory has a profound application for the church. Job's anguished questions from the ash heap have an astonishing answer. Our suffering is not a sign that Christ has betrayed us rather it is a sign of our fellowship with the risen Lord who first suffered for us.

Here is a closing word for those who are suffering right now. Only Christ can replace your resentment with rejoicing. Jesus is the central piece of the sufferings puzzle. If you fit him into place the rest of the puzzle, no matter how dark, begins to make sense.

This is why we treasure the best of books.
For we can turn to it at all times to find help.
When we read it in times of joy we find Jesus the source of joy.

When we treasure it in times of sorrow we meet the man of sorrows.
He is the one who gives us a divine identity, a living hope, a genuine faith and an amazing salvation.