

“The Salvation of Your Souls”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: Peter 1:1-12; Daniel 12:5-13

Why does God allow his people to find themselves as aliens and strangers in their own land? How do Christians find joy in times of trial and suffering? What purpose can there be in suffering such as this? Peter will seek to answer these questions by pointing his struggling readers and hearers back to the promises God makes to us in the gospel. We have been given a living hope grounded in the same power through which God raised Jesus from the dead, a hope to be realized in part in this life, but fully in the next. This hope is not just so many words, but is grounded in the fact that what the Old Testament prophets (and even angels) longed to see, has come to pass in the person and work of Jesus Christ and now the basis of the living hope promised to the people of God.

We continue with our new series on 1 Peter by undertaking a brief review of the ground we covered last time (Peter’s greeting in vv. 1-2), before we turn to our text (vv. 3-12), which is the Apostle Peter’s opening words of encouragement to the elect exiles of the Diaspora in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). As we saw last time—I would encourage you to listen to last week’s introductory sermon on the church website or my blog—Peter is writing to Christians and Jews throughout much of Asia Minor, many of whom had been uprooted from their homes by a decree from the Roman emperor Claudius, which granted land in this region to retired Roman soldiers. Many of those uprooted by Claudius’ decree were Christians (both Jewish and Gentile) who were viewed as exiles in their own land because they refused to worship the Roman gods (including Claudius), and because they would not participate in local pagan religious rituals, many of which were part of daily life in the Greco-Roman world.

The Apostle opens this letter by declaring, “*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*” The Christians throughout the provinces mentioned were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Although hated by their neighbors because of their Christian faith, Peter tells them they can take great comfort in the fact that they are loved by God who has chosen them in Jesus Christ, “*according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.*” Foreknowledge is not merely God’s knowledge of what will happen in the future, but refers to God’s intimate knowledge of the individuals whom he has chosen to save through the merits of Jesus Christ. God knows each of these people personally. He knows their trials and their suffering.

These “elect exiles,” as Peter identifies them, are chosen by God and said to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, for the purpose of “*obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.*” Although Peter’s audience are now exiles in their own land, God has called his elect out from pagan darkness into the wonderful light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The primary meaning of “sanctified” as used here by Peter means to be set apart by God for his purposes. In this case, those called by God through the gospel are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus (the guilt of their sins is washed away) and are set apart for obedience to Jesus, the one who saves them from their sins.

Peter’s greeting to these elect exiles is overtly Trinitarian. God’s people are not merely theists, but they are believers in the one true God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their belief in the Triune God, as well as salvation by the merits of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, marks these exiles off as citizens of a heavenly kingdom. They may live as exiles in the civil kingdom with its joys, duties, and dangers, yet they possess a heavenly citizenship for which they long, and which gives

this life meaning and purpose. These elect exiles need to know that whatever suffering and persecution they experience during their time in exile during the Diaspora is actually preparing them to receive all of the benefits of their heavenly citizenship by strengthening their faith.

Peter's use of the term "exile" is not limited to the original audience. There is a sense in which every believer in Jesus Christ is a resident alien (a sojourner, a pilgrim) in whatever society in which they live—their true citizenship is where Christ is, in heaven. The original audience of this epistle were truly exiles—booted from their homes by the Romans. But all Christians are exiles in this world (resident aliens), making the journey to the heavenly city and longing to dwell in the home of righteousness—the new heaven and earth. Peter encourages such exiles by reminding them that through the saving work of the Triune God, "*grace and peace are multiplied*" to them. These suffering saints experience Roman oppression everywhere in their midst, and they feel the constant sting of life as an exile. They are in desperate need of the encouragement which Peter offers them.

One of my favorite commentators—Charles Cranfield—makes a very important point about the context in which Peter offers praise and thanksgiving to God in the opening words (v. 3). Cranfield writes, "only a few months and the Neronian persecution will have burst upon the Church in Rome, where the Apostle is writing, and have it cost many martyrs—among them, the Apostle himself." Cranfield goes on to say, "Already the storm clouds are gathering. There is an oppressive sense of insecurity. The Christians in Asia Minor to whom this letter is addressed are apparently also seriously alarmed, and, we suspect, prone to self-pity." In other words, they were likely wrestling with the question of why it was that God was allowing this terrible hardship to happen to them.

Cranfield points out that this letter was written by Peter "to confirm feeble knees" among his hearers. So, how does Peter begin his letter? "Not by offering sympathy, not by trying to convince them that what they fear will never happen, nor yet with a rehearsal of [Peter's] own troubles." No, Peter opens this letter to the elect exiles throughout Asia Minor "with an ascription of praise to God."¹ Christian pilgrims should not ignore or deny the reality of their suffering as a Greek stoic might do, but they can only gain a proper perspective their trials and travails by considering who God is, what he has done for his people, and the promises he makes to those whom he has chosen in Jesus Christ. And so Peter begins with praise unto God the Father for what he has done in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The ascription of praise which opens verse 3, "*blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!*" is typical of Jewish prayers. The act of "blessing" means to direct our praise unto God the Father because of (or on the grounds of) of who he is (our Creator), as well as what he has done for us as our redeemer—sending his Son to save us from our sins. We were chosen to be sprinkled with the saving blood of Jesus, and then we are set apart for God's purposes (sanctification) and for obedience to God's commands. On the contrary, pagan letters from the period profusely thank the "gods" thereby seeking to gain their favor. The Apostle gives praise unto God even in times of suffering and trial, knowing that God has a purpose for everything, and that he will redeem his people even in the midst of their struggles.

When we direct our praise to God the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit, we are giving thanks for all of the blessings of the gospel. Peter spells out these blessings in the string of clauses and prepositional phrases in verses 3-5. The first of these is "*according to his great mercy.*" Peter does not

¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 33-34.

begin with the justice of God—knowing that if the Triune God poured out his judgment upon us, we would face him as guilty criminals standing before an omnipotent, omniscient, and holy God who knows everything about us and how sinful we truly are. Instead, Peter says, God deals with his elect exiles according to his mercy—specifically that he demonstrates his mercy to us through the work of his Son.

Furthermore, Peter says, “*he [the father] has caused us to be born again to a living hope.*” Notice that God initiates our salvation—God is the one who acts in mercy upon us while we are dead in sin. The word Peter uses (*anagennēsas*) refers to a “rebegetting or begetting anew rather than being born anew,” just as in 1 Peter 1:23, “where believers are said to be begotten (*anagennēmenoi*) by the imperishable seed of God’s word.”² God “causes” (or brings about) the new birth when he makes those dead in sin to be alive through the preaching of the gospel. This is what we mean when we say the Holy Spirit works through means—in this case, the preaching of the gospel (the “word”).

It is very common to hear Christian evangelists command those in their audience to “be born again,” as though we could raise ourselves from the dead by repeating a prayer after the minister, walking the aisle, or by inviting Jesus into our hearts. People who are dead in sin cannot raise themselves from the dead. In fact, the Bible nowhere commands us to “born ourselves again” (even in John 3 and the account of Nicodemus). Rather, the Bible everywhere tells us that *unless* we are born again (regenerated, made alive) by an act of God, we cannot see the kingdom of heaven. We will remain dead in our sins. This is the simple distinction between the imperative mood (a command) and the indicative mood (a statement of fact). Peter could not be any more direct than it is God who *has caused us to be born again*. Through his word and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God raises us from death to life, and in doing so, gives us a living hope—that is a hope tied to the future life (heaven) and to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as indicated in the next clause, “*through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*”

When Jesus was raised from the dead the new creation dawned. When Jesus conquered death and the grave, both the guilt and the power of sin—which kept us enslaved, and to the curse, which is death—were forever and finally broken for all those for whom Christ accomplishes his redemptive work. Just as God raised Jesus bodily from the dead the first Easter, so too, he causes us to be born again, when we were dead in sin. This is what we mean when we speak of salvation as monergistic (one working). Dead people do not cooperate with God when he gives them new life. We do not save ourselves with God’s help—God saves us from beginning to end. He *has caused* . . .

By tying this living hope to the resurrection of Jesus (a once for all event which cannot be reversed), Peter can speak of “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*” Peter is drawing upon a number of Old Testament passages here (especially from Joshua and the conquest of Canaan) all of which speak of an inheritance in typological terms—temporal and earthly blessings which point beyond themselves to eternal and heavenly blessings. We may be exiles, pilgrims, and sojourners in this life, but what awaits us and which gives us hope is the knowledge that our heavenly citizenship is so much better than the inheritance promised to Israel in passages such as Deuteronomy 15:4—“*for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess.*”

For the Israelites, possession of the promised land was conditional upon Israel’s obedience to the terms

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), imported from Logos.

of the covenant God made with his people at Mount Sinai. This is why the blessings of that earthly inheritance were so often clouded by death, disease, drought, disaster, and conquest by pagan enemies. But the heavenly inheritance of which Peter is speaking is guaranteed to God's elect exiles by a bloody cross and an empty tomb. Our heavenly inheritance was earned for us by Jesus Christ through his life of obedience, his death for our sins, and in his resurrection from the dead. This inheritance cannot perish and more than Jesus Christ can go back and die again after his resurrection. It cannot be polluted by human sin, it will never lose its luster or its splendor. As these elect exiles have come to see, earthly blessings (land, possessions, wealth, prestige) can perish in an instant at the whim of Caesar in Rome. But heavenly blessings are *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*. Even better, Peter says, God "keeps" them for us until we receive them in full.

The struggling elect exiles are assured that this inheritance will be theirs because it is by "*God's power [that they] are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*" The same power manifest when God raised Jesus from the dead is applied to these elect exiles who are "being guarded" until they receive everything promised to them. "The word 'shielded' (*phrouroumenous*) can be translated 'guarded' or 'protected.' It is used of putting garrisons in a city to protect it from foes."³ God does not promise to protect Christian exiles from all suffering or persecution while they live as aliens in this fallen world. What God does promise is to preserve them in the faith so that they receive their promised inheritance when their heavenly citizenship is realized—when they die (and enter into the presence of the Lord), or if the Lord should return first.⁴

The debate about whether or not a Christian can lose their salvation (if they truly were saved and united to Jesus in his death and resurrection) seems to be settled by the fact that the faith of each of the elect exiles is guarded by God with the same power evident when God raised Jesus from the dead. When we say that a Christian cannot lose their salvation, we do not mean that we are strong enough to keep ourselves saved—we mean that God is strong enough to keep us in faith! God guards his people's faith until they receive all that he has promised to them. He keeps his own from falling away.

At this point, we should note that several influential critics of Christianity (most notably Marx and Feurbach) have argued that the idea of an afterlife (a heavenly inheritance such as described here) is a sort of intellectual opiate which dulls people so they don't embrace the necessity of radical political action in this life because they mistakenly think there will be an after life when all wrongs will be righted. For these thinkers, God does not exist but is a projection of the desire for a better place when we die. Peter's point is not that our longing for heaven makes this life meaningless. On the contrary, our heavenly citizenship gives meaning and purpose to everything in this life—even those times when we suffer, and when we struggle as exiles in a foreign land. All Marx and his ilk could offer was a sham utopian society which never once got beyond the theory to the real world, and which ended up producing the likes of Lenin, Stalin, and a system of Gulags (prisons) resulting in the death of millions through revolutions, purges, and war. I'll take Peter's living hope over a Marxist utopia any day!

If, in verse 3-5, Peter has directed the suffering exiles receiving this letter to give praise to the Father for the living hope which God has secured for them by the resurrection of Jesus, then in verses 6-9, Peter speaks of the joy which even suffering Christians experience in this life and which will be realized when

³ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos.

⁴ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos.

Christians enter into the fullness of salvation revealed “in the last time” through the work of Christ. We should understand what follows in the sense that having the hope of eternal life, Christians can rejoice in the midst of suffering, as we await the full inheritance Jesus has promised us. Peter puts it this way in verse 6. *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.”* The Christian life is one of rejoicing, joy, and blessings, even in times of great trial and suffering. As Cranfield puts it, joy “does not vanish at the approach of trouble.”⁵

The reason why this is the case is that our sufferings have a purpose as spelled out by Peter in verse 7: *“so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”* Trials are a test of faith—not to see if we have faith, or even to see if we have strong faith—but trials are a means of strengthening our faith, however weak or tenuous our faith may be. Even in those times when we suffer and are tested to our limits, our faith grows stronger. Let me be clear here—it is not the suffering which is joyful. Suffering is miserable and no one (in their right mind) wants to suffer. Rather, we rejoice when we suffer (an expression of joy) because we know that our suffering will come to an end (after a “little while”). An athletic metaphor is useful here—exercise and training are painful. But it makes us stronger, give us endurance, as well as the sense that we can make our way though what is to come. This is what suffering does to faith—makes it stronger. Notice too, there is nothing said here about suffering because God is punishing us. What is said is that when we undergo trial, God guards our faith, making it strong.

When seen in this light, our faith becomes more precious to us than refined gold. Like the exiles receiving this letter, all worldly possessions and comfort may be taken from us—yet we still have joy in knowing that through these struggles God is preparing us to receive our future inheritance. He even gives us a taste of it now through word and sacrament. It may seem as though faith is all we have, but we must realize how precious faith is in times of trial. Faith has been given to us by Jesus himself, who then guards it so that our faith grows stronger even in the worst of times. The result is, Peter says, that *we* will receive praise, glory and honor when Jesus returns—a very important statement. Elect exiles will one day reach their true home and receive their inheritance. God has caused us to be born again, we believe (trust) in Jesus and his promises, God allows us to suffer and undergo trial, but he guards our faith, strengthening it, making it far more valuable than fine gold, so that in the end, we receive praise, glory, and honor. The guarantor of the heavenly inheritance ensures that we receive what he promised to give to us. This living hope is what enables struggling Christians to not only endure their struggles, but find meaning and purpose in the midst of them. God is preparing us to receive our inheritance.

The remarkable thing is that *“though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”* Not one of us has ever seen Jesus—yet we love him just the same. Our Savior reveals himself to us through his word, in his sacraments, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have not seen him, but we love him. We have not seen him, but we believe in him because God caused us to be “born again.” Our faith in Jesus is grounded in the gospel accounts of his miracles, his teaching, and the fact of his resurrection. No doubt, Peter is here recalling the words which Jesus once spoke to Thomas in John 20:29, *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* There are plenty of good reasons to believe in Jesus, but the only reason we do so is because he has granted faith to us. This is why we love Jesus, believe in Jesus, trust in Jesus, and rejoice in what Jesus has done for us in ways which human speech cannot fully express—although Peter tries to do so. *We rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.*

⁵ Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 41.

Because we love Jesus and we believe (trust) in him, Peter says, his readers/hearers “*obtain the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” Our faith has an object—the person and work of Jesus. Faith does not save—faith looks to Jesus who saves us. Faith receives, rests in, replies upon, and trusts that the merits of Jesus are sufficient to save us from our sins. So too, having faith in Jesus—that he will save us from our sins by his death and resurrection—we will receive everything which Jesus promises, the salvation of our souls. In speaking of our souls, Peter is not saying that God will save only our souls and not our bodies, but that he will save “us” i.e., the whole person.⁶ God begins his work in the present—when he caused us to be born again (i.e., the first resurrection, spiritual rebirth). He will bring the new birth to its final outcome—the final salvation of each of the elect exiles. This occurs on the last day when Jesus raises the dead and reunites body and soul, which have been torn apart by death.

Peter reminds his readers that this promise was anticipated throughout the entire course of redemptive history. As he says in verses 10-11, “*concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.*” Many commentators, and I think correctly, see an echo here from Old Testament passages such as Daniel 12:7-10 (part of our Old Testament lesson) where the prophets sought to inquire into the meaning of the prophecies given them by YHWH, but were told that these things could not be understood until the time of the end (i.e., when the messianic age had dawned).

At the end of his prophecy, Daniel laments, “*and I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be finished. I heard, but I did not understand. Then I said, ‘O my lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?’ He said, ‘Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.’”⁷ Peter explains that the time of the end is at hand, and what Daniel sought to understand has been revealed in and through the person of Jesus.*

Peter encourages struggling Christians that even as the prophets longed to see the outcome of their prophecies (but did not), those same prophecies are now fulfilled by Jesus Christ and the benefits are now enjoyed by all of God’s elect exiles. In verse 12, Peter says to them, “*it was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.*” The prophets looked ahead to that time when the promises YHWH first revealed through them are enjoyed by all believers in Jesus. Even the angels desired to know what would happen when Jesus appeared as the incarnate Savior. Now they know. So do those to whom the good news of the gospel has been preached, and who, through the work of the Holy Spirit, have now heard *and* believed.

When we fall into the quicksand of trial and tribulation, we tend to focus upon our misery and easily fall victim to despair. We cry out “why?” and we complain that it is not fair that we are forced to struggle to keep from being pulled in deeper and deeper. Peter’s word of encouragement to the recipients of this letter reminds them of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and that even as the saints of old longed

⁶ Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 60.

⁷ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos.

to see how things would turn out in the end, Christians are the beneficiaries of hearing in the gospel the very things which the prophets and angels longed to see. We have a living hope. Our faith—weak as it is—is guarded in the midst of our struggles by the very same power through which God raised Jesus from the dead.

Because all of God's wonderful promises made to his old covenant people have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we have every reason to believe that the promises God makes to us about our heavenly inheritance will likewise be fulfilled. In the midst of our struggles, Peter reminds us that God's track record of keeping his promises is pretty good. In Jesus Christ, the Father has caused us to be born again, and through the work of his Spirit, he ensures the salvation of our souls. He has promised to save us from our sins—he has. He has promised to give us a glorious inheritance which is *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*—and he will.