

STEWARDS OF GOD'S GRACE

1 Peter 4:1-11

Introduction

→ Illust. [From Illy]... ASSURANCE

In one of my favorite Peanuts cartoons Lucy and Linus are staring out the window, watching it rain. The conversation goes like this:

Lucy: "Boy! Look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?"

Linus: "It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow."

Lucy, turning back to the window with a big smile: "You've taken a great load off my mind."

Linus: "Sound theology has a way of doing that!"

Chuck Swindoll comments: "Wise and timely words from little Linus. With feelings of fear and uncertainty while watching events from our windows, many of us often hear least what we need most. Sound, reliable theology that offers reassurance and hope...based squarely on God's Word. Not feelings or opinions or even logic. We need to hear what God has said and rest our case there."

[Eternal Security: The Assurance of Our Salvation by Charles Swindoll. Zondervan, 1995.]

In the book of 1 Peter, we encounter some very important theology to help us deal with our fears and uncertainty. The primary concern on Peter's mind is persecution and suffering. His intent is to encourage his suffering readers to keep on, to remain strong, to never give up.

Quote: No matter how bad things get, you got to go on living, even if it kills you. - Sholem Aleichem.

This morning I want to refer briefly to what I skipped over in last week's message and then to go on to look at the first half of ch. 4.

Look with me for a moment at 1 Peter 3. *Read vv. 18-22* – I want to specifically address the statements in vv. 19-21. My first thought is to wonder why Peter made these statements at all. It seems unnecessary to his argument. However, I believe that everything in the Word of God was put there by the Holy Spirit for a reason. So...

There are many opinions about what Peter meant by Christ preaching to the spirits in prison. I am only going to mention a couple. (*Some of this is taken from the ESV Study Bible and the MacArthur Study Bible*) Those who hold to the first interpretation understand "spirits" as referring to the unsaved (human spirits) of Noah's day. They would say that Christ, "in the spirit" proclaimed the gospel "in the days of Noah" through Noah. The unbelievers who heard Christ's preaching "did not obey ... in the days of Noah," and are now suffering judgment—that is, they are "spirits in prison." This view takes some fairly serious interpretive license to the verb tenses to make it fit, but it is possible.

In the second interpretation, the spirits are fallen angels, or demonic spirits who are currently imprisoned awaiting the final judgment. MacArthur: "*Between Christ's death and resurrection, his living spirit went to the demon spirits bound in the abyss and proclaimed that, in spite of his death, he had triumphed over them. **Spirits in prison** ... refers to fallen angels (demons), who were permanently bound because of heinous wickedness.*" So, this prison in which these demonic spirits are being held is not hell, but rather the abyss—the bottomless pit, where they are awaiting the final judgment when they will be cast into the lake of fire for eternity.

The message Christ proclaimed or preached to these spirits in prison was not the gospel, but a message of victory—a message of triumph over death and sin. In spite of their attempts to destroy God's program, Christ wanted them to know that he was the victor.

A couple of other notes from these verses. Verse 20 – days of Noah – *discuss the connection to the "sons of God" in Gen. 6...* MacArthur says: "*Peter ... explains that the abyss is inhabited by bound demons who have been there since the time of Noah, and who were sent there because they severely overstepped the bounds of God's tolerance with their wickedness. The demons of Noah's day were running riot through the earth, filling the world with their wicked, vile, anti-God activity, including sexual sin, so that even 120 years of Noah's preaching, while the ark was being built, could not convince any of the human race beyond the eight people in Noah's family to believe in God. Thus God bound these demons permanently in the abyss until their final sentencing.*"

The ark was the refuge of safety for eight people – Noah and his family. They were saved not by the water but from the water. The water was God's means of judgment, not of salvation.

Then in v. 21 Peter draws a comparison between salvation in the ark and baptism. ESV Study Bible: *"In both instances, believers are saved through the waters of judgment, since baptism portrays salvation through judgment. The mere mechanical act of baptism does not save, for Peter explicitly says, "not as a removal of dirt from the body," meaning that the passing of water over the body does not cleanse anyone. Baptism saves you because it represents inward faith, as evidenced by one's appeal to God for the forgiveness of one's sins (for a good conscience). Furthermore, baptism "saves" only insofar as it is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a visual representation of the fact that Christians are clothed with Christ, and in union with Christ they share his victory over sin."*

Well, with that, I am going to leave that subject and move on to today's text. Here we are faced with the truth that God wants to use our suffering for our benefit and to use us in our suffering for his glory. We are to be stewards of God's grace as we live out our lives in the midst of affliction and struggles in this world.

There are two specific points that I want to consider from this passage this morning.

Suffering as Christ suffered forces us to clarify our priorities vv. 1-6

I can think of few things which will cause us to refocus and rethink the things which really matter the way that suffering will. The options Peter puts before us are to identify with Christ and to suffer in the flesh, or to identify with the world and indulge our fleshly desires. Peter calls on us to arm ourselves with Christ's way of thinking, as he willingly suffered in the flesh for our salvation.

Look at some of the things Peter says in vv. 1-6.

A suffering believer has "ceased from sin..." vv. 1-2. The focus of a believer who has suffered with Christ is no longer on his own evil human

desires but on God's will. When we suffer affliction, it refocuses our sights on what is truly important—living out our days not for ourselves but with the desire to do God's will.

Living a life of righteousness will bring ridicule and misunderstanding vv. 3-4. Go through vv. 3-4 discussing the transformation that is described in these verses. You can be sure that when you surrender your life to Christ and determine to live your life for him, there will be those, particularly those who were part of your old life who will misunderstand and malign you, even mock and ridicule you.

▣ Illust. 207: THE WONDERFUL CHANGE

The story is told on an English earl who visited the Fiji Islands. Being an infidel, he critically remarked to an elderly chief, "You're a great leader, but it's a pity you've been taken in by those foreign missionaries. They only want to get rich through you. No one believes the Bible anymore. People are tired of the threadbare story of Christ dying on a cross for the sins of mankind. They know better now. I'm sorry you've been so foolish as to accept their story." The old chief's eyes flashed as he answered, "See that great rock over there? On it we smashed the heads of our victims. Notice the furnace next to it? In that oven we formerly roasted the bodies of our enemies. If it hadn't been for those good missionaries and the love of Jesus that changed us from cannibals into Christians, you'd never leave this place alive! You'd better thank the Lord for the Gospel; otherwise we'd already be feasting on you. If it weren't for the Bible, you'd now be our supper!"

There is coming a day of judgment when the accounts will be settled vv. 5-6. You see, ridicule doesn't matter to the devoted child of God because he knows that someday we will all stand before God to give an account. Not only those who are alive when Christ comes, but also those who have died will be raised and will face the judgement of God.

Verse 6 has also created a great deal of confusion and false teaching over the years. Some have suggested that there is a link between this verse and 3:19 – Christ preaching to the spirits in prison and suggesting that there is a second chance for those who have died. However that view is untenable, based on the clear teaching of Scripture.

The ESV Study Bible: *“Given the immediate context, ‘those who are dead’ refers to Christians to whom ‘the gospel was preached’ when they were alive but who have since died. This fits with the meaning of ‘dead’ in v. 5. Even though believers will experience physical death (i.e., they are judged in the flesh the way people are), believers who have died live in the spirit the way God does (that is, they live in heaven now, and they will live as well at the resurrection when Christ returns).”*

So, suffering as Christ suffered forces us to clarify our priorities. Peter shows us another change that occurs in vv. 7-11...

Keeping our eyes on eternity causes us to adjust our attitudes and actions vv. 7-11

In vv. 7-11 Peter gives us another view of the change which occurs in the life of a suffering believer. It is our focus on eternity.

The end of all things is at hand. This does not mean that Peter was expecting Christ to return in the next few days or weeks. MacArthur: *“The Greek word for “end” is never used in the NT as a chronological end, as if something simply stops. Instead, the word means a consummation, a goal achieved, a result attained, or a realization.”*

So, Peter is pointing the perspective of suffering believers toward the second coming of Christ, which is the consummation or goal of all things. He is calling us to live obediently and expectantly in the light of Christ’s return. is at hand. The idea is that Christ’s return is near; that is, “imminent.” It could happen at any moment.

It is interesting to note that Peter believed that the end was close at hand. The believers of every generation have lived with the thought that perhaps Christ might come in their lifetime. Let’s look at some of the things which he says will take place when we have an eternal outlook on life – when we are living with an acute awareness that the end is near.

There will be an awareness of the need for clear thinking and self-control – v. 7. This is the second time Peter has called his readers to sober-minded clarity of thought – see 1:12. Only this time, he links it together with self-control. In suffering we need clear thinking and self-control, in

order that we can effectively focus on Jesus Christ and to be able to pray earnestly and effectively to our heavenly Father.

There will be a focus on love for each other – vv. 8-9. Consider the plight of those who are faced with tremendous suffering and affliction, especially persecution because of faith in Christ. The love they demonstrate for one another is incredible. Sharing food with others, giving aid, which could endanger their own lives. But all because we know that the end is near, and we must live out our lives in the light of that truth.

Our actions will be governed by God’s gracious gifts – vv. 10-11b. It is interesting that in the midst of this discussion of suffering – in the light of eternity, Peter should turn to the subject of spiritual gifts. And yet it is somehow appropriate, because history has shown that when the going is tough, that is when people seem to become even more determined in the appropriation of the gifts God has given them and they begin to serve one another with more intensity and more fervor. Even in the midst of suffering, perhaps especially in the midst of suffering and affliction, we are called to be ministers—stewards—of God’s grace. Verse 11 – Peter categorizes spiritual gifts very simply into two groups – those who speak, and those who serve. It matters not which area we are gifted in, the source is God. Those who speak must speak the words of God; those who serve must serve through the strength and power that God supplies.

Our goal will be to glorify God – vv. 11c-d. Jesus Christ is the one we serve and through our service, even in suffering, God is glorified. It is God to whom belongs all glory and honor.

Conclusion

Well as we look for application, let me simply summarize:

- Think about suffering the way Christ thought – v. 1
- Live your life to please God, not your own desires – v. 2
- Be aware of coming judgment – v. 5
- Live with eternity in view – self-controlled, sober-minded – v. 7
- Love others with all earnestness – v. 8
- Be a good steward of God’s grace toward you – v. 10
- Seek to glorify God in everything – v. 11