

1 Peter 3:8-4:19

BACKGROUND

1 Peter could be renamed, “Advice to Christians undergoing persecution.” It was written from the church in Rome to churches in the backwater regions of the empire of Bythinia and Pontus, and quite possibly by Peter, just before Nero’s persecution of the church. Throughout the letter the author (a) gives practical advice; (b) articulates the new perspective and context of the believer; and (c) addresses the question of shame and loss of face for believers.

In chapter 1, the mostly-Gentile readers are named as members of the elect, and the implications of this are explored, including exhortation to live holy lives. In chapters 2 and 3, Peter addresses the question of why others reject Christ, and moves on to give advice specific to slaves, then spouses in mixed marriages. In 3 and 4, Peter again urges holy living, both in relation to one another, and when dealing with the “Gentiles.”

1 Peter has the interesting property that most passages parallel some other NT passage. Rom 12-13, for instance, finds parallels scattered throughout 1 Peter, on topics including love within the Body, obedience to civil authorities, etc.

QUESTIONS

1. Peter does not shy away from exhortation in this passage:

- In relating to fellow believers:
 - Have unity of spirit (3:8)
 - Be sympathetic, humble and tender-hearted (3:8)
 - Maintain constant love for one another (4:8)
 - Be hospitable to one another without complaining (4:9)
 - Use your gifts to serve one another (4:10)
 - Speak as those speaking the very words of God (4:11)
 - In dealing with outsiders:
 - Respond to evil with a blessing (3:9)
 - Do not fear what they fear, but sanctify Christ as Lord (3:14)
 - Always be ready to give a defense... (3:15-16)
 - Arm yourselves with the intention to suffer in the flesh (4:1)
 - Do not be surprised by your “fiery ordeal” but rejoice at sharing in Christ’s sufferings (4:12)
 - In personal holiness:
 - Keep your conscience clean to shame your persecutors (3:16-17)
 - Be serious and disciplined for the sake of your prayers (4:7)
- a. For each of these three categories, in broad strokes, what motivation does Peter give?
- b. Now imagine a member of the first-century church in Pontus is brought to our time. How might you change the emphasis of the above advice to make it appropriate to our setting—and descriptive of our small group?

2. Peter twice quotes Psalm 34: In 2:3, when he encourages them to “long for the pure, spiritual milk,” since they “indeed... have tasted that the Lord is good”; and in 3:10-12, where they are exhorted to righteous living, since “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous... but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Ps 34 has the superscription, “Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.” To quote Carson & Beale,

One cannot read the psalm without feeling the sense of euphoric relief at having escaped—an escape that must finally be credited to the Lord himself... The logic that [Peter] assumes is not hard to find: just as God delivered David from the dangers implicit in his sojourn among the Philistines, so also God will deliver Peter’s Christian readers from their sojourn among the pagan communities.¹

- a. This message is the classic lesson of proverbial wisdom that good things happen to good people, and the opposite for bad. Wisdom literature make two

assumptions: (1) that people can be divided into the righteous and the wicked; and (2) that its rules never break down, as when good people suffer. The former may require some head scratching for Christians asking who really *is* righteous. The latter certainly describes persecuted Christians, including Peter, and Christ himself. It even describes the 85 priests at Nob who aided David in his flight and were slain by Saul (1 Sam 22:17)—and for that matter Joseph, Daniel and his friends, and many OT figures. How does Peter have the courage to tell these Christians undergoing a “fiery trial” that, if they are good, it will all work out?



- b. Jesus also taught in the Hebrew Wisdom tradition, but turned the Proverbial wisdom on its head. In his Sermon on the Mount, e.g., “blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10; see also 10:24) Anticipating the reaction of the World to his teaching, Jesus cautions his disciples to fear God, “him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell” (Lk 12:4-5). In the words of Joel Green, “To clarify, Peter urges that suffering in the present and blessedness before God in the Day of Judgment are preferable to pleasure or gratification in the present and suffering in the Day of Judgment.”²

What, if any, continuity do you find between OT Proverbial wisdom and Peter’s and Jesus’ teaching? Do you suppose Jesus and Peter read Psalms and Proverb in their daily devotions? How can Peter and Jesus serve as models for reading Psalms and Proverbs?

3. Peter cautions his readers to live righteous lives so that God will hear their prayers:

¹ *Commentary on the NT use of the OT*, p. 1022, 1037.

² *1 Peter* (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary, 2007), p. 113.

- 3:7: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.”
- 3:12: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”
- 4:7: “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.”

We read elsewhere, “the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16, but see 5:15); that Jesus’ prayers were heard because “of his reverent submission” (Heb 5:7); and that “the prayer of the upright pleases [the Lord]” (Pr 15:8, 29);

- a. Why would this be true? Is God more likely to listen to the righteous?
- b. Can you think of any examples from Scripture where the prayers of the righteous were more effective than those of less righteous members of the elect? (Cf. Jas 5:17-18.)
- c. This suggests that if you want to pray for those in need—even for yourself—you should first get your house in order and get serious about your relationship with God. Have you found this to be true? Is this advice you would be willing to give someone praying for those undergoing trials?

4. Of 3:15, PHEME PERKIN writes,

Many adults today are inarticulate when asked to explain their Christian faith. If a challenger is not silenced by a few Bible verses or religious phrases, people will shrug and change the topic. Such reactions would hardly serve as a “defense” of the faith. Once ABC News reporter said during an interview that people are quite willing to reveal the most intimate details of their sexual lives, but mostly mainline church members have nothing to say about their religion. First Peter indicates that all believers, not only clergy and theologians, should be able to give an account of what they believe.³

Discuss. When was the last time you shared your faith with someone outside the church?

5. The example of Christ’s sufferings is a theme running through both the NT and 1 Peter. Given the unique reasons for Jesus’ suffering, why is it good that we also suffer? (Cf. Rom 5:3-5; 8:17-18; 2 Cor 1:5-7; Philip 3:10-14; Col 1:24; etc.) And if it is good to suffer, should we regret that God often does not choose to favor those in the West with the suffering experienced by those in the villages of China?
6. 1 Peter has the notably obscure passage, 3:18-20, describing Jesus “proclamation to the spirits in prison.” Later, in 4:6, we read that “the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead.” The two main theories are that the “spirits in prison” are either those who perished in the Flood, or the Nephilim, the fallen angels of Gen 6:1-6. Most favor the second option because of apparent parallels to the apocalyptic text 1 Enoch, the first 36 chapters of which describe the fate of the Nephilim. The “dead” of 4:6 are thought to be believers who have died, making these two passages unrelated. This is traditionally believed to be a reference to Jesus preaching to the dead between Good Friday and Easter.

How do these fit into the flow of Peter’s letter? Does your answer depend on the identity of the “spirits in prison?”

³ First and Second Peter, James, and Jude (1995), p. 63.

Fun fact: Peter tells his readers (3:8) to be “tender-hearted.” This is a translation of the Greek *eusplanchnos* (ευσπλαγχνος), which is a physiological diagnosis literally meaning “healthy entrails.”

Fun observation: Peter repeatedly holds Jesus’ suffering up as an example for Christians to follow. This is especially ironic given that he once rebuked Jesus for saying the Messiah had to suffer and be crucified (Mt 16:21-23; Mk 8:31-33). “Arguably, Peter himself was the first of the apostles to develop Suffering Servant Christology. It has frequently been pointed out that of the five instances in the NT where Jesus is referred to as the *pais* (“servant”), two are found in a speech attributed to Peter (Acts 3:13, 16) and ‘two more are found in a prayer of the early Jerusalem church when Peter is in leadership (Acts 4:27, 30).’” [Beale & Carson, p. 1034.]