

1 Peter 4 and 5, continued

1. Suffering is a major theme in this letter, especially in these passages: 2:18-25; 4:12-19; 5:8-10 (see also 1:10-11; 3:17-18). According to 1 Peter, is suffering
 - a. A sign of God's displeasure
 - b. An indication of resistance by the Enemy (cf. ch. 5)
 - c. An inevitable response of the world to the gospel
 - d. A tool used by God for our growth
 - e. All of the above
 - f. None of the above

Has RCRC gone through anything which could be classified as suffering, during the time you have attended? Was it of the same type as Peter refers to even if of different degree?

2. 1 Peter 4:6 refers to the gospel being "proclaimed even to the dead." As early as the second century we have record of Christians interpreting this and other passages to indicate a messianic mission to Hell between Good Friday and Easter, for Jesus to (a) share fully in the fate of humanity; (b) conquer Death or Hell or both; (c) rescue the righteous dead; (d) proclaim salvation to the dead (cf. Green, 128).¹ For instance,

from the early second century, the *Gospel of Peter* has it that in the immediate aftermath of the resurrection Jesus and the two assisting him out of the grave, "heard a voice out of the heavens crying, 'Has thou preached to them that sleep?' and from the cross there was heard the answer, 'Yea'" (10:41-42).

Clement of Alexandria reasons that Jesus must have descended to preach to the dead in order to give those righteous who died before Jesus the chance to believe, and not be "condemned without trial" (*Stromateis* 6:6).

This verse is fundamental to the belief, popular in the middle ages, that Jesus, between crucifixion and resurrection, not only preached to the dead, but freed some from damnation, in the "harrowing of hell." This captured the imagination of believers and remained popular in Christian imagination until the scholastic period. It occasionally appears even now—as in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where we read of Aslan raiding the witch's stronghold and rescuing animals she's turned to stone.

The appeal of this theory lies in the triumphant Christ it depicts. A focus on Jesus' triumph is found various places in Scripture, especially John, and has been found in the Fathers as early as Irenaeus and Augustine². In 1 Peter the victorious elements include their being guarded by God's power (1:5); their

¹ Many other passages are marshaled for support of this theory, but I personally find them unconvincing.

² "He that was alone free among the dead, that had power to lay down his life, and power to take it up again: for us was he unto thee both the Victor and the Victim, and therefore Victor, because the Victim: for us was he unto thee both the Priest and the Sacrifice, and therefore the Priest, because the Sacrifice..." (*Confessions* X:43). Irenaeus refers to Jesus' victory over Satan: "both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampling upon his head ..." (*Against Heresies*, 5.21.1).

status as a holy priesthood (2:9-10); their ability by God's strength to stand up to the Devil (5:9); that they follow the one who rules the angels, powers and authorities (3:22) and whose power is eternal to confirm, strengthen and support them (5:11). This focus is found clearly today especially in those Charismatic or Pentecostal churches where one sees an emphasis on the victory of Christ over sin, death, disease, evil spirits, etc., and a realization in this life of the eschatological blessings.

- a. Triumphalism is naturally accompanied by a sense of the imminence of Christ's return. The Reformed tradition tends to focus more on God's grace than his triumph. In this sense we live as if we were further from the end times. The potential abuses of triumphalism have been well catalogued and need not be repeated here. What *strengths* of *Christus Victor* theology do we miss out on in our tradition?
 - b. It is dangerous to base a theology on just one verse. For the sake of argument, though, assume 1 Peter 4:6 correctly indicates that those who died prior to Jesus were given a post-mortem opportunity for conversion. What implications might this have? How might this change the way you view salvation?
3. 1 Peter 4:17 tells us, "... the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" Here Peter is paraphrasing Prov 11:31, "If the righteous are repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!"

To quote Beale and Carson,

The context of 1 Peter 4, however... shows that this is referring to what his Christian readers are currently suffering at the hands of pagan oppressors. Their suffering is unjust. So how can this be thought of as in any sense a mark of God's eschatological judgment, which is what [the prophets prophesying of judgment such as] Ezekiel [9:5-6], Zechariah [13:9] and Malachi [3:1-3] have in mind?³

[Cf. also Prov 11:21; Habakkuk.]

4. In 5:8-9, Peter warns, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

Elsewhere in Scripture we read of Satan blinding the eyes of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4) and misleading believers (2 Cor 10:3-5); accusing the brethren (Rev 12:10); prowling about, bringing direct persecution to Christians (1 Pet 5:8-9; 12-13); and seeking division within the church (Eph 4:26). In the clearest passage on spiritual warfare Paul writes, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

- a. Is Scripture describing a sentient enemy or a personification of evil? Does it matter?
 - b. The dangers of too great a focus on spiritual warfare are well known. Is there any danger in *not* thinking about Satan or spiritual warfare?
5. Miroslav Volf writes the following regarding the attitude of 1 Peter toward non-Christians:

³ *Commentary on the NT use of the OT*, p. 1041.

Celsus, the most insignificant critic of Christianity in the second century, wrote, 'If all men wanted to be Christians, the Christians would be no longer want them.' In fact he insisted that Christians were so fascinated with rejecting what is common to all people that they themselves would no longer want to be Christians if everyone decided to become one. In his views, the primary point of reference for Christian identity was the non-Christian world. Christian identity is established through the negative activity of setting oneself apart from others. Christian distance from society is a spiteful difference for the sake of difference, nourished by a deep-seated resentment against the dominant social order which rejected them. Is this what we find in 1 Peter?

There is no doubt that 1 Peter stresses the church's difference from its social environment. This is what the metaphor 'aliens' suggests and this is what surfaces repeatedly throughout the epistle. But what is the significance of this observation for the nature of Christian identity? I suggest that the crucial question is not to what degree one stresses difference, but rather on what basis Christian identity is established. Identity can be forged through two related but clearly distinct processes: either through a negative process of rejecting the beliefs and practices of others, or through a positive process of giving allegiance to something distinctive. It is significant that 1 Peter consistently establishes the difference positively, not negatively. There are no direct injunctions not to behave as non-Christians do. Rather, the exhortation to be difference centers primarily on the positive example of a holy God (1:15f) and of the suffering Christ (2:21ff). This is surprising, especially given the situation of social conflict in which the Petrine community was engaged. We expect injunctions to reject the ways of the world; instead we find admonitions to follow the path of Christ.

When we encounter negative examples of how Christians should not behave, then our attention is drawn not so much to the life-style of non-Christians as to 'the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul' (2:11). These are, as 1 Peter points out explicitly, the former desires of Christians themselves. The force of the injunction is not 'Do not be as your neighbors are!' but "Do not be as you were!" This fits with the observation that the new birth distances people first of all from their old culturally shaped self and in this way from the world. This is what the logic of the metaphor of new birth suggests, but this is also what 1 Peter explicitly states: 'you were ransomed from your futile ways inherited from your ancestors' (1:18). What permeates the epistle is not a fixation on distance from the world, but enthusiasm about the eschatological future.⁴

Why would Peter take this approach?

How do you think and talk of your distance from the surrounding, non-Christian culture?

How does the culture regard its distance from you? (And is it aware of its distance from you?)

Fun fact #1: Bach allegedly wrote five passions, of which only two survive: the *St. Mark Passion* and the *St. John Passion*. "...the two that survive complement each other beautifully. It has long been noted that the *St. Matthew Passion* is more meditative and contemplative whereas the *St. John Passion* is more

⁴ "Soft Difference," *Ex Auditu*, 10, 15-30 (1994); see pp. 20-21. Volf does an excellent job identifying and articulating 1 Peter's strength in providing guidance for dealing with non-Christian world.

dramatic. But beyond being complementary in character, the two passions... complement each other in theological emphasis. The *St. Matthew Passion* emphasizes the satisfaction theory of the atonement, the *St. John Passion* the *Christus victor* theory. Thus Bach's two surviving passion settings stand as musical monuments to the two main ways by which the church has sought to explain the mystery of the atonement." (Calvin Stapert, "Christus Victor: Bach's St. John Passion", *Reformed Journal*, **39**, 1989, 17-23.)

Fun fact #2: "Thus entrusted to you" in 5:2 (Gk. kleroi means '[your] appointed portions'): kleros, from which we get our 'cleric', was originally an allotment of land; then it referred to an office assigned by lot, and here refers to the flock assigned to a particular pastor." [New Bible Commentary on 5:3.]