



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Suffering: Remember This First

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As we read 1 Peter, it is evident that Peter wanted to prepare his readers to endure suffering, especially the suffering of persecution (1 Pet 2.19–21; 3.14, 17; 4.15–16, 19; 5.9–10). To that end, he reminded them that Christ had also suffered and then promised that, if they remained faithful, their suffering would be temporary and would not defeat them. He thus urged them to commit to faith over fear; the devil would continue to prowl, but they *could* resist him (5.8–9).

But even as we take note of his assurances, we observe that, except for a passing reference in 1.11, Peter doesn't use the word “suffer” until 2.19. In other words, although “suffering” appears in more than 14% of the letter's 105 verses, it doesn't become the focus until he has written forty-two of them—40% of the letter. Peter first provides a theological basis for hearing what he wants to teach them about suffering, pointing to a truth bigger than any hardship they would experience.

Remember God (1.3a)

Richard Bauckham begins a chapter on Jesus' kingdom activities with the following:

In the modern period, Jesus has often been seen as a teacher of ethics or a social reformer. These views are not completely mistaken. There is a good deal of material in the Gospels to support them. But they are seriously inadequate. They focus in too modern and humanistic a way on how people should live. But what fired Jesus' mission was his experience of *God*. What mattered to him first and foremost was the God of Israel, God's love for his people and his world, and what God was doing for his people and his world. How God's people should live also mattered profoundly,

but it would never have occurred to Jesus that one could get that right without appreciating what God was like and what God was doing (Bauckham 2011, 35).

From the first paragraphs of the letter, it is evident that Peter's close relationship with Jesus had nurtured him to embrace the focus on God to which Bauckham refers. Indeed, from the outset, "it is clear that the core category in 1 Peter is God" (Davids 2014, 157). His emphasis begins with the first words after the greeting: "Blessed [εὐλογητός, *eulogētos*] be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1.3a). Drawing from his Jewish heritage, where the typical manner of prayer included "a series of 'blessings of God'" (McKnight 1996, 68), Peter exalts God before addressing other concerns.

It seems obvious that Christians would make God our primary focus; after all, Jesus defined eternal life as knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, the one he had sent (John 17.3). But experience teaches that we are susceptible to attending to other matters in a way that effectively relegates God to the background. Not all these concerns are unimportant—they might, for example, include attention to God's commands or, as Bauckham noted, to ethics or social reform. But these matters, vital as they are, are only secondarily important. To prioritize them is to diminish our view of the one in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28), the one from whom comes the power we need to endure suffering. Peter reminds us that we must remain focused on God and his honor. "For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God" (Packer 1973, 30)?

Remember What God Has Done (1.3b)

In the last part of verse 3, Peter turns to the character of God; he acted "because of his great mercy." The fundamental display of that mercy is the "new birth" he has given us (ἀναγεννάω, *anagennaō*). Reflection on the newness aspect of this birth reminds us both why and how badly we needed for it to happen. Because of sin—and all it took for this outcome was one sin—we had fallen "short of the glory of God" (Rom 3.23). Therefore, we had become helpless, not merely separated from God, but his enemies (Rom 5.6–10). In the same situation as all others without access to his promises, we were "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2.12).

But because we have taken God at his word and accepted his mercy, our desperate situation has been reversed. We have been born "into a living hope." The present participle form (ζῶσαν, *zōsan*) indicates that, in this verse, "living" is not the object of hope, but its quality. We have "a living hope [that] is never extinguished by untold circumstances, just as living waters flow fresh from a perennial spring" (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 566).

It's important to remember that hope as understood by Peter and other NT writers is, in the words of William Barclay, "not the hope which looks forward with wistful longing; it is the hope which looks forward with utter conviction.... a hope that has turned to certainty" (Barclay 1976, 128). Peter's readers have this certainty because their hope comes "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3). They have "a fixed 'hope,' a clear vision of what God will do for them in the future" (McKnight 1996, 71).

Remember What God is Doing (1.5–7)

Verses 5–7 flesh out additional assurances for the Christian's living hope. God's people are "being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5). Peter's use of the military term, "guarded" (φρουρέω, *phroureō*) would have resonated with people used to seeing the Roman legions. His use of the present tense participle form of the word adds to their confidence, promising that God will continue to protect them, no matter how intense their suffering becomes.

The reference to "salvation" adds still another layer of certainty. On the one hand, the word (σωτηρία, *sōtēria*) reiterates the idea of deliverance from sin and its consequences. But in the NT, it also refers to "that wholeness which, like John's 'eternal life,' can be known, received and experienced in the present, but will find complete disclosure and realization in some day of consummation" (Blaklock 1977, 27).

It is within the context of that salvation that Peter alludes to their trials as experiences that also show God's mercy. There are two levels of assurance here. First, their trials will only continue "for a short time" (v. 6). Second, they serve the purpose of removing spiritual impurities, in a way similar to how fire burns the dross from gold. This is a lesser to greater argument: the salvation they possess is "more valuable than gold." Their trials are therefore part of the process that will "result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 7).

Remember What God will Do (1.4, 7, 9)

The look to the future in the last part of verse 7 continues an idea first introduced in verse 4 and continued in verse 9. In verse 4, it is expressed in terms of the imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance that is being kept in heaven for God's people (discussion [here](#)). Since this is also an act of God's mercy, we should always see it in a way that exalts his role and diminishes our own.

Capping off these great promises is the assurance in verse 9 that Christians "are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." The "soul" (ψυχή, *psychē*) is not "a special part of man's structure, but is man as a whole; it is a Jewish rather than a Gr[reek] or modern image of the world" (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 568). Thus, this is a comprehensive statement about salvation.

Conclusion

We are grateful that Peter began his letter with a focus on God and what he has done, is doing, and will do instead of turning immediately to the matter of suffering, or even to how Christians should live. For it is in the nature and character of God that we can "rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy" (v. 8), a "joy [that] defies all human efforts at understanding or explanation" (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 568).

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

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An Additional Thought — Peter's Good Greek

“To object that a Galilean [like Peter] could not have achieved some polish in the writing of Greek is to misunderstand the linguistic patterns of the ancient world. From the days of Alexander, Greek had penetrated the Mediterranean world. It was the second tongue of the Middle East. Peter had lived in the presence of Greeks all his life and, for a generation, had lived in cities where Greek was the common language. Even in Rome it was used along with Latin. Not half a century later Juvenal, the Roman satirist, was complaining that Rome was becoming a Greek city, and worse, the East was pouring in and ‘the Orontes had become a tributary of the Tiber.’”

~ E. M. Blaiklock. 1977. *First Peter: A Translation and Devotional Commentary*. Word Books, Publisher, 25–26

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“Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘Opening the Scriptures,’ September 22, 2026”

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