

Indeed, it is the confidence of Peter and of the Christian church in the greatness of Christ's salvation that makes these words of his necessary. Since death is God's judgment on sin, and since Christ has paid the price of sin, it might seem that Christians should not die but live until the second coming. Peter explains that even though they are judged in the body *according to human standards*, they live in the spirit *according to God*.

3. Understanding the time of our stewardship (4:7)

Peter presents the positive side of the contrast in lifestyle. Not drunken debauchery and licence, but sober clear-headedness marks Christians (7). Love, not lust, fills their hearts (8); the Christian home is open for hospitality, not orgies (9). Ministry replaces exploitation (9–11). The dissolute lives of pagans fail to recognize their accountability to the Lord in the day of judgment, a day that is fast approaching. This is exactly what Christians do recognize: *The end of all things is near*. Peter had seen the Lord ascend from the Mount of Olives until he vanished in a cloud. He had heard angels repeat the promise of the Lord that he would come again. The whole New Testament emphasizes the expectation of the Lord's return; Peter's hope in the Lord looks to that event, and to the salvation ready to be revealed with Christ (1:5, 8–12; 4:13, 17; 5:4, 10).¹⁹

The end . . . is near: our contemporaries expect to see that warning crudely lettered on a sandwich board carried by a figure with long hair and dirty sandals. The figure appears often enough in cartoons and advertising, but rarely on city streets. Yet the smug assumption that only a 'crazy' would prophesy the end has begun to ring hollow in our modern age. How different is the Christian expectation of the end from the foreboding that sees nuclear annihilation! The Christian looks for the Lord, who will bring judgment, justice and the wonder of a new creation.

That realization brings sobriety to the Christian's use of time. Three times in this short letter Peter exhorts the Asian Christians to be sober (1:13; 4:7; 5:8). Obviously, this includes literal sobriety in contrast to drunkenness, but it also indicates the attitude of mind that is the opposite of drunken stupor or delusion. Sobriety means watchful waiting for the Lord's return, realistic living. (See the comments on 1:13.) *Alert* describes

¹⁹ Kelly notes, for example, Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 7:29; Heb. 10:25; 1 John 2:18.

the practical wisdom that comes from the knowledge of the Lord. In Greek use the term was contrasted with mania; the demonized man healed by Jesus was found seated, clothed and 'in his right mind'.²⁰ Preoccupation with the second coming, particularly by those who have set a date for it, has often led to hysteria rather than sober wisdom. 'Faced by the imminent end of all things the community must not give way to eschatological frenzy. In such excess it would fall victim precisely to this world.'²¹ Jesus described faithful servants as 'dressed ready for service' and busy as they waited for the returning Lord (Luke 12:35–43).

Sobriety and a clear mind have one value above others: they equip us for prayer. Peter does not think of prayer as an effort to induce ecstasy, but as sober, direct, profoundly thoughtful communication with the Lord. His whole letter points us to the depth and glory of our fellowship with Christ. We have not seen him, but we love him; we set him apart as holy in our hearts. Peter's love for Christ is intensely personal; he is overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord. He does not, therefore, advocate prayer as a cold, rational exercise. But we might say that he advocates it as a *fervent*, rational exercise. Fervent love, agonizing intercession: these are marks of true prayer. Peter knew of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Prayer tastes the agony of struggle or the delight of communion with God. Yet prayer seeks the Lord, not a transformation of consciousness.²² Prayer demands alertness. Peter failed in Gethsemane. He slept when Jesus had charged him to watch and pray (Mark 14:37). Peter goes on to speak of the fervent love for others that we should show, and of the service of love. Thoughtful and earnest prayer will seek God's blessing on those whom we love and serve.

4. Serving in the grace of our stewardship (4:8–11a)

New life in Christ is lived in a community of loving service. Peter brings this section of his letter to a climax by appealing again to the fervency of love that binds together the new people of God (see 1:22). Jesus taught that love for God and for our neighbour fulfils the law, and Peter, with Paul, puts love first in our walk of obedience and fellowship.²³ *Love each other*

²⁰ Mark 5:15; Luke 8:35.

²¹ Ulrich Luck, 'sôphrôn', TDNT VII, p. 1102.

²² See E. P. Clowney, *Christian Meditation* (IVP USA, 1980).

²³ Matt. 22:37–40; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:22.

The Message of 1 Peter

in which Satan attacks Jesus with respect to both his calling as Messiah and his identity as the Son of God. Satan's power is seen in his claim to control the kingdoms of the world; his subtlety is evident in the skill with which he quotes Scripture, calling on Jesus to test God's promise.

Jesus repulsed the attack of Satan and defeated him. Later, Jesus said that his casting out of demons showed that he had bound the 'strong man' and could therefore plunder his house, delivering those who were his slaves.⁴⁵ With the cross in view, Jesus spoke of his triumph over Satan: 'Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:31-32). Jesus saw Satan, a defeated foe, fall as lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18).

But the fact that Satan has been cast down from heaven and knows that his time is short makes him, in a sense, a more formidable adversary (Rev. 12:12). His fury against the Lord and his kingdom is the more intense. He may threaten the church from within, masquerading as an angel of light.⁴⁶ He may rage from without, using the fire and sword of persecuting tyrants. But the Christian knows that 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet' (Rom. 16:20). James, in his parallel passage, says, 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (Jas 4:7). The danger to Christians is not that they are helpless before the devil. They are equipped with the whole armour of God: the shield of faith will extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one (Eph. 6:10-18). The danger to Christians is that they will fail to resist, that they will not watch and pray, that they will not put on the whole armour of God and take the sword of the Spirit. That sword, the word of God, was the weapon Jesus used in his ordeal in the desert; it is ours to use in his name.

Peter calls on us to do what he had failed to do in the garden of Gethsemane: to watch and pray. Roaring Satan is a tethered lion. He cannot tempt us beyond what we can endure, for God will not permit it (1 Cor. 10:12-13). No temptation can overtake us that is not common to human beings, a temptation that has been overcome by others. Peter reminds his hearers, *you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings* (9). The Lord who prayed for Peter prays for us (Luke 22:32).

⁴⁵ Matt. 12:28-29; Mark 3:23; Luke 11:19-22.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor. 11:14; Acts 20:29.

In southern France, overlooking the Mediterranean, stands the Tower of Constance. There, in the eighteenth century, Huguenot women were imprisoned for decades because they refused to surrender their Reformed faith. In the tower room where they were held captive, a stone coping surrounds a round opening in the floor. Inscribed in the stone is the word 'Résistez!' Marie Durand entered that room in 1729, when she was fifteen years old. Three years later her brother Pierre was hanged at Montpellier. In 1745 she was offered her freedom if she would agree to renounce Protestant worship. She refused all such offers and remained captive for thirty-eight years, resisting the temptations to despair, to suicide, to betrayal. From her imprisonment she began a ministry of encouragement by correspondence. Some of her letters are kept today in the Museum of the Wilderness in the mountains of the Cévennes.⁴⁷

If Satan is to be resisted, *sobber* watchfulness is called for. Sobriety includes both alertness and realism. Christian wisdom will recognize the seductions by which Satan would deceive the church as well as the imitations that he would substitute for it in an endless stream of sects and -isms. Peter has already linked our sobriety to hope and prayer (1:13; 4:7).

Satan can be resisted only in a *firm* and settled *faith*. The word translated *firm* is used in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 50:7. There it describes the fixed endurance of the Messiah in terms of a solid rock:

I gave my back to the scourges, and my cheeks to blows; and I turned not away my face from the shame of spitting; but the Lord God became my helper; therefore I was not ashamed, but I set my face as a solid rock.

As Selwyn observes, the phrase 'solid rock' in this passage would not be lost on the apostle whom Jesus had named Peter, the rock.⁴⁸ Jesus, fulfilling the Old Testament passage, had set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem; we must be rock solid in our trust in him.⁴⁹

Peter has reminded us that the testings do not destroy our faith, but purify it. Since the peculiar nature of faith is its looking not to oneself but to the Lord, it is most strongly grounded when it is most dependent.

⁴⁷ Charles Bost, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-198, 200.

⁴⁸ Selwyn, p. 238.

⁴⁹ See Luke 9:51. The verb is similar to the adjective *firm* in 1 Pet. 5:9.

'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So the Lord said to Paul, and Paul could therefore say: 'For when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:9–10). In order to resist the devil we draw near to God (Jas 4:8).

Suffering Christians who look to the Lord also gain comfort by remembering the family of believers (2:17). Samuel Bénétreau points out four advantages to be gained from knowing that *the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings* (9). First, there is encouragement in knowing that you are not alone and isolated, suffering in a unique way. Second, you are reminded that the bond that unites you to Jesus Christ also joins you to the family of God throughout the world. Suffering Christians have a caring fellowship with those similarly afflicted. Third, Christians are reminded that suffering is inherent in the Christian faith. Through suffering they have fellowship with Christ and their faith is purified. Peter speaks of the suffering that must be 'accomplished' or 'brought to its end' by the 'family of believers'. Suffering has its place in God's plan for a world destined for justice, peace and glory. Christians know that the 'family of believers' does not suffer in vain; their experience of suffering is being brought to the victorious conclusion that God has designed. Fourth, knowing of these sufferings stimulates hope. The spread of persecution and trials points to the nearness of the consummation: the promised land is in view.⁵⁰

ii. The assurance of God's saving purpose (5:10–11)⁵¹

Peter closes his letter as he began it, rejoicing in the royal *grace* of God in Christ. The hope that will sustain the church through its fiery trial of suffering is hope in the sovereign grace of God. It is God who saves, from start to finish. God's initiative stands at the beginning of salvation. He has called us by his grace (1:1–2). God's purpose arches over the end of our salvation. He has called us to his own glory (1:7, 11; 4:13; 5:1, 4). The glory of God, the consuming fire of his holiness, becomes the transforming light of his love to those who have been 'chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father' (1:2). God's glory is an inheritance that can never be devastated, defiled or turned to dust (1:4). The glory endures, for

⁵⁰ Bénétreau, pp. 277–278.

⁵¹ This passage resembles 1 Thess. 5:23–28; 2 Thess. 2:13–17; Heb. 13:20–21. See Selwyn, pp. 239, 369–384.

it is the blessing of God's eternal presence. Because the Spirit of glory already rests on the believer, the suffering church already tastes of the glory of the Lord (4:14). Paul, too, joins the beginning with the end of salvation: God's electing call and God's final work of glory (Rom. 8:29–30). 'The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it' (1 Thess. 5:24).

The glory to which God calls is his glory *in Jesus Christ* (2 Thess. 2:14). Peter had experienced the awe of Christ's glory in the cloud that accompanied his Master's transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:17). Yet after Christ's resurrection he had also joined his glorified Lord on the familiar shore of the Lake of Galilee for a breakfast of broiled fish (John 21:10ff.). Peter's hope of glory was not an indefinable nimbus cloud: it was as definite as the scarred hand of Jesus that passed the breakfast fish. Peter had heard the call of God in the voice of Jesus; he had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus. He rejoices that God has called others from the nations of the world to share his precious hope. They have not seen Jesus, but, like Peter, they love him.

God's call to the glory of Christ comes through the *grace* of Christ. God is the God of all grace, grace that can meet every need and prevail in every situation. Peter describes the power of that grace in four verbs: God will *complete his work in us, establish us, strengthen us and ground us* (10). Our brief time of suffering will not turn aside his gracious work. With joyful confidence we may cast all our cares on him.

First, God will make us complete (NIV *restore*). The word means 'to put in order', 'to make right'. It may describe 'restoring', putting right what was wrong, as a surgeon sets a broken bone. It may also describe 'completing', giving further order by providing what was lacking. Finally, it may mean 'preparing' or 'creating', giving initial order and shape. Peter, of course, had known the restoring power of God's grace after the ordeal of his denial. In this context, however, the thought of God's completing his work in believers is probably foremost. We are not to suppose that these actions of God will take place only after the time of suffering is over.⁵² Rather, God's gracious work of completing and perfecting us begins now, during the brief time of our suffering. Indeed, God uses suffering to perfect us as he leads us to the time when he will complete our transformation in the glory of Christ (1:6–7).

⁵² *After you have suffered* is a fair translation of the participial construction, but puts more emphasis on the temporal sequence. For the thought of 'completion' see Heb. 13:21; 2 Cor. 13:9.

My younger brother, Billy, was a gay man who had AIDS. My parents were Christians who held to the church's historic teaching that homosexuality is a sin. When Billy took a turn for the worst and was moved into a hospice, my parents, then in their seventies, moved nearly a thousand miles, slept at nights on a pullout couch in a relative's den, and for seven months stayed beside Billy and cared for him fourteen hours a day. They did not confront him about or even bring up their differences. They fed him sips of juice and spoonfuls of yogurt. They served his most basic needs. Eventually, he himself brought up the issues that had divided the family for many years. He was able to do so because my parents had created a climate of care in which such a frank discussion felt safe to have. We talked them through with truth and tears, and many relational and spiritual issues were resolved.

Weeping in the Dark

There is seldom a place provided for lamentation in the church, and down to the present day, many do not give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out, "Where are you, Lord? Why are you not helping me?" John Feinberg felt the sting of being told—directly and indirectly—that he shouldn't grieve *too* much, that he needed to quickly get on to "rejoicing in tribulations." But Feinberg felt dead inside; he wanted to do that but could not. Reading and praying the Psalms of lament back to God would have been good counsel, but no one offered it to him.

Psalms 88 is a lamentation Psalm, but even within the category of the Psalter's "sad songs," it stands out. Most Psalms of lament end on a note of praise, or at least some positive expectation. But this one and one other, Psalm 39, are famous for ending without any note of hope at all. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner says of Psalm 88, "There is no sadder prayer in the Psalter."³⁴⁸ The Psalm was composed, according to the title, by Heman the Ezrahite. The last word of the Psalm in Hebrew means "darkness," saying that darkness is *my closest friend*. It is a forceful way of saying bluntly to God—and *you* aren't! Yet when read in light of the whole Bible, the text is a great resource and even encouragement. Heman writes:

Weeping

Lord, you are the God who saves me;
 day and night I cry out to you.
 May my prayer come before you;
 turn your ear to my cry.
 I am overwhelmed with troubles
 and my life draws near to death.
 I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
 I am like one without strength.
 I am set apart with the dead,
 like the slain who lie in the grave,
 whom you remember no more,
 who are cut off from your care.
 Do you show your wonders to the dead?
 Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
 Is your love declared in the grave,
 your faithfulness in Destruction?
 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
 or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?
 I cry to you for help, Lord;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 Why, Lord, do you reject me
 and hide your face from me?
 From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
 I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
 Your wrath has swept over me;
 your terrors have destroyed me.
 All day long they surround me like a flood;
 they have completely engulfed me.
 You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
 darkness is my closest friend (Psalm 88:1–6; 10–18).

As we read this we learn, first, that believers can stay in darkness for a long time. Three times in the Psalm the word *darkness* occurs (v. 7, 12, 18). The effect is to say it is possible to pray and pray and endure and things not really get any better. The Psalm ends without a note of hope,

and so its teaching is that a believer can live right and still remain in darkness. Darkness may symbolize either outside difficult circumstances or an inner spiritual state of pain. That is the very realistic, tough message at the center of this Psalm. Things don't have to quickly work themselves out, nor does it always become clear why this or that happened. One commentator wrote: "Whoever devises from the Scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing this page out of the volume."³⁴⁹

Second, we learn that times of darkness—while they continue—can reveal God's grace in new depths. Heman is angry. He is essentially cross-examining God, saying, "I *want* to praise you. I *want* to declare your love and faithfulness to others." There is no "I'm sure you will bring good out of this, God." Finally, at the end, Heman is virtually saying, "You've never really been there for me." He does not keep control of his temper nor does he speak reverently to God. And yet Derek Kidner says: "The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to His understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate."³⁵⁰ Kidner's point is this: If we believe that God through the Holy Spirit inspired and assembled the Scriptures for us, then we see that God has not "censored" out prayers like this. God does not say, "Oh! Real believers don't talk like that! I don't want anything like *that* in my Bible." As in the case of Job, this does not mean that Heman's attitude is blameless. Nevertheless, neither at the end of the book of Job nor here do we see God saying that all cries of agony are illegitimate. God understands. Or, put another way, it shows that God remains this man's God not because the man puts on a happy face and controls all his emotions, but because of grace. God is patient and gracious with us—he is present with us in all our mixed motives. Salvation is by grace.

Heman is not praising God—he's weak and falling apart—yet here is his prayer in the Psalter. It's an encouragement to be candid about our inner turmoil, to pour it out and express it honestly.

Third, we learn that it is perhaps when we are still in unrelenting darkness that we have the greatest opportunity to defeat the forces of evil. In the darkness we have a choice that is not really there in better times. We can choose to serve God just because he is God. In the dark-

est moments we feel we are getting absolutely nothing out of God or out of our relationship to him. But what if *then*—when it does not seem to be paying or benefiting you at all—you continue to obey, pray to, and seek God, as well as continue to do your duties of love to others? If we do that—we are finally learning to love God for himself, and not for his benefits.

And when the darkness lifts or lessens, we will find that our dependence on other things besides God for our happiness has shrunk, and that we have new strength and contentment in God himself. We'll find a new fortitude, unflappability, poise, and peace in the face of difficulty. The coal is becoming diamond. J. R. R. Tolkien describes one of his characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee, who has a similar trial of faith and comes through it.

But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength . . . and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue.³⁵¹

That's what can happen to us. As we noted, we know little about Heman, but we still have a hint of what happened in his life. Kidner says:

If there is hardly a spark of hope in the psalm itself, however, the title supplies it, for this supposedly God-forsaken author seems to have been one of the pioneers of the singing guilds set up by David, to which we owe the Korahite psalms, one of the richest veins in the Psalter. Burdened and despondent as he was, his [life] was far from pointless. If it was a living death, in God's hands it was to bear much fruit.³⁵²