

1 Peter: Persistence Through Difficulty

Session 5 1 Peter 4:7-19

I. 1 Peter 4:7-11

1. In 4:1-4 Peter places the suffering of Christians (for their faith) in the context of Christ's suffering. Christ suffered "in the flesh" and, therefore, Christians must "arm yourselves with the same way of thinking" (4:1). It is important to note what this means. Christ's suffering is not an end in itself but is the consequence of his faithfulness to God. The "way of thinking" with which we need to be armed is that faithfulness will often result in suffering because "the powers" (supernatural and human) find faithfulness threatening. The lives of people who embody the rule of God threaten forms of supernatural and human rule.
2. 4:7 returns to an essential theme: suffering must be seen in the larger context of the consummation of God's rule. The "end of all things" was inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection. "End" here means something like "goal" rather than termination. The consummation of God's rule is not, as we have seen, a call to disengagement or irresponsibility. Peter's concern is to order the life of the Church so that it is capable of providing a witness that runs counter to the world.
3. If the consummation of God's rule is "at hand," then what passes for "the way things are" is revealed to be untrue. In the case of those Peter is addressing, the Roman Empire, its cultural norms and assumptions are shown to be temporary and, thus, open to resistance. In order to do this, Christians need self-control and seriousness of mind (4:7; cf. 1:13). Note that hope is not simply a sentiment. The "Gentiles" structure their lives around their expectations and live accordingly, driven by "sensuality" and "passions" (4:3). In short, their actions reflect their belief that life has no real meaning. Christians are called think about their hope in the coming of God's rule and to then live accordingly. This requires serious, discipline thought which will go "against the grain".
4. All of this, note, is "for the sake of your prayers" (4:7). Prayer is about several things. It is certainly about aligning one's character and actions with God's character (1:15-16!). Prayer plays an important role in character formation. Prayer also makes one aware of God's gracious character. Prayer, therefore, is essential in sustaining the life of the Church.
5. Peter then sets out three disciplines for the Church which will sustain its common life. The first discipline is "loving one another". Love means several things and among these is cultivating a sense of solidarity, a sense of all having a responsibility for the good of all. It also means having a commitment to promoting harmony within the Church. It is important to note that what Peter counsels is mutual love. This love "covers a multitude of sins" (4:8) in that the commitment to love enables one to be patient with the sins and

faults of others. Love does not overlook sin or ignore it but, rather, is committed to work through it when one's first inclination is to "go away mad".

6. Hospitality was an important cultural practice (4:9). Peter's point here is that hospitality flows from a hospitable character, one which does not "grumble" at doing others good. By hospitality, Peter may have several things in mind. Since Christians had to meet in homes, one form of hospitality involved those with larger homes making them available for gathering. Another form of hospitality would have involved shared meals. This practice would build up a sense of family solidarity within the Church.
7. Finally, Peter notes that each member of the community has received a gift from God and is to use it in the service of others (4:10). These gifts are from God with those who have them serving as "stewards of God's varied grace". This completely removes the question of status from the Church, something that would have preoccupied Greco-Roman culture. Gifts come from God and are given to steward on behalf of God for God's purposes. In other words, everyone is to see him or herself as engaged in the service of everyone else. In taking on this posture, Christians reflect the character of God. (Note how much this text parallels Philippians 2:5-11). Through mutual service and love and through suffering, God will be glorified through Jesus Christ in whom God's character is revealed.

II. 1 Peter 4:12-19

1. Central to this section is the tradition of the "messianic woes," the suffering of God's people which precedes the coming of God's kingdom. This tradition begins in the Old Testament (Daniel 12:1, for example) and can be found in the New Testament as well (Philippians 3:10). In the New Testament, the messianic woes" mean that the members of Christ's Body share in his sufferings and, therefore, also share in his glory (as in Romans 8:17).
2. Given that this is the case, the coming of a "fiery trial" (4:12) should come as no surprise; indeed, it should be anticipated. The existence of supernatural and human powers in rebellion against God will mean that suffering should be thought of as normal and not as "something strange" (4:12). Note that this means that when Christians suffer for their faith, they are co-suffering with Christ (along the lines suggested by Acts 9:4).
3. Far from suffering being the cause of shame, suffering with Christ is an honor and should be the cause of rejoicing (this is the message of Philippians 3-4). To suffer with Christ is to know that one will rejoice on the day "when his glory is revealed" (4:13), that is, on the day when he finally establishes God's rule over creation and restores the whole created order.
4. 4:14 may be an allusion to Isaiah 11:2. Here, the Spirit of God "rests upon" the Messiah. We have already seen that the Spirit plays an essential role in the Christian life (1:2). Those who suffer with Christ. Those who suffer for their faith can be assured that the Holy Spirit is actively present among them and this makes the true nature of their sufferings clear. It is significant that the Spirit is referred to as the "Spirit of glory". Of course, this is probably another way of saying "Spirit of God" but it could also be a way of

pointing to the Spirit's role in restoration of creation, a restoration which will reveal God's glory.

5. It is important to note that Peter does not attempt to downplay suffering. He simply says that it must be understood as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ (4:13). If Jesus' death glorified God, then the suffering of Christians does so as well (4:16). Peter is clear about what does not constitute Christian suffering. If one suffers because one is a criminal or immoral, one does not suffer as a Christian.
6. 4:16 does not sound all that revolutionary to us but it would have to Peter's addressees. It is important to note that the primary thing associated with crucifixion was shame (note Hebrews 12:2) and the purpose of the persecution directed against Peter's addressees was to inflict shame. Peter throws this aside by saying that Christian suffering glorifies God. Their suffering means the exact opposite of what their persecutors think that it means.
7. What Peter says about judgment in 4:17 presupposes what he has said in 4:22. Judgment means the whole creation being put right as it is "subjected" to Christ. This begins in the Church and then moves on to "those who do not obey the Gospel of God" (4:17). In 4:18 Peter cites Proverbs 11:31 to make the point that those who suffer righteously will be saved but only barely. This emphasizes how desperate the situation is. The Church must do exactly what Christ did, entrust himself to God the "faithful Creator" while "doing good" (4:19).

1 Peter: Persistence Through Difficulty

Session 6 1 Peter 5:1-14

I. 1 Peter 5:1-5

1. In this section, Peter addresses three groups within the “household of God” (4:17): “the elders among you” (5:1), “you who are younger” (5:5), and “all of you” (5:5). While Christians are members of the “household of God,” this does not grant them status but, rather, obligates them to the pattern set for them by Christ. This pattern means the same thing for everyone: humility (5:5)
2. Peter identifies himself as a “fellow elder” and not as an apostle. This is almost certainly intentional as he emphasizes what he is “with them” (an elder) and not what he is “for them” (an apostle). He identifies himself as a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” (5:1). While he could be referring to Jesus’ crucifixion, he probably means all of his afflictions. Along with all Christians, Peter shares in the messianic sufferings of Christ (the sufferings which he now experiences in his Body as the Head) and is a partaker in “the glory that is going to be revealed” (5:1). As Peter has made clear in 3:18-22, the patterns set by Christ is that of walking through suffering and into glory.
3. It is important to realize that the language here of shepherding and “flock of God” (5:2) is drawn from the Old Testament where Israel’s kings and priests are her “shepherds” and guard a flock that belongs to God (Ezekiel 34 is a prime example of this). The elders have care of a flock that is not if their possession but, rather, which belongs to God. They are to exercise care “willingly” and not “under compulsion”. In doing this they will imitate God who shepherds Israel graciously and not because of some compulsion. Their leadership is to reflect the divine graciousness.
4. The shepherds are to avoid “shameful gain” or avarice. This has to do with fundamental motives and outlook. Care for God’s flock cannot be reconciled with a love of money and those motivated by the latter will not engage in the former.
5. Shepherds are also to avoid authoritarianism. They are not be “domineering”. In other words, they are to exercise an authority which would have been very different from the practice of authority in Greco-Roman culture. Mere authority tends toward authoritarianism; elders must set an example by following the example of Christ. Peter reminds us that Christian leadership is primarily about character. This kind of service will lead to an “unfading crown of glory” (5:4). In the Greco-Roman world, the laurel crown was the sign of honor in the realms of sport, politics and the military. Of course, such crowns faded (literally) because they were bestowed by human authority. The “crown” bestowed by Christ reflects his status as the one who has authority over all things (3:22). Shepherds are representatives of the “chief Shepherd” (5:4).

6. Finally, Peter addresses “you who are younger” (5:5). As we have seen previously, the imperative “be subject to” means something like, “find our place in relation to”. Just as all Christians must find their places in relation to “every human institution” (2:13), so the young need to find their place in relation to the elders, understanding what the elders are called to do. Everyone (including the elders) is to put on humility. In Greco-Roman culture, status was indicated by clothing and Peter tells all Christians that their status is to be indicated by their humility. At the end of 5:5 Peter cites Proverbs 3:34 which points toward what he means by humility. The humble are those who recognize and accept their status as creatures before God. Doing this, of course, undermines social norms of status.

II. 1 Peter 5:6-11

1. The response of Christians to persecution or difficulty finally depends upon how they view God. To humble oneself under God’s “mighty hand” (5:6) requires trust and acceptance of God’s providence. This is not passivity. Trust in God’s merciful providence and final deliverance make it possible for all anxieties to be cast upon him (5:7). The endurance of persecution and suffering is only possible in the trust that God is both merciful and powerful—God genuinely cares for his people and can deliver them. Apart from this faith, suffering will simply result in the withering of the Christian life.
2. The phrase “mighty hand” (5:6) recalls the Exodus (Exodus 13:9) such that Peter presents the final deliverance of God’s people as the Final Exodus. We should probably see an echo of Exodus 19:4 in 5:6 and in 5:10. 5:10-11 make it clear that the future will simply involve the manifestation of Christ’s lordship over all things. We are called to God’s “eternal glory” which probably means several things. First, it probably means that we are called to fulfill the human vocation which God originally intended for us, which was to serve as his representatives in creation. Second, it probably also means sharing in God’s glory as those who truly and fully bear his image.
3. What is called for, Peter says, is sober-mindedness and vigilance. To be sober-minded is to see things as they really are which involves neither optimism nor pessimism. The sober-minded will understand their situation and its challenges without distortion but will also understand their situation in the light of Christ’s victory. Vigilance is necessary because their ultimate opponent is not the Roman order, but the devil who is a “roaring lion (5:8). The roaring indicates both the search for prey and the attempt to intimidate. The sober-minded will not be intimidated because they will know that the devil can be resisted (5:9). Finally, Christians must understand themselves to be part of a world-wide community of suffering. This suffering is not a permanent condition because “dominion” belongs to God (5:11). Suffering is real and so is the possibility of death. It may look as if the Church is simply doomed to failure. Evil is also very real. But none of these things outweighs the reality of God’s mercy and power.

III. 1 Peter 5:12-14

1. Though brief, the conclusion of the letter is fairly dense with meaning. Peter mentions two people, Silvanus and Mark, who are his associates. Who are they? Silvanus (5:12) is

described as a “faithful brother”. This lets us know that he is an example of the pattern that Peter has been commending. He is a “good steward of God’s varied grace” (4:10). Most likely, Silvanus would be the one who would have read Peter’s letter to each congregation and would have provided an interpretation of it. Quite possibly, he may have written the letter at Peter’s dictation. Is the Mark in 5:14 John Mark mentioned in Acts 12:12 and 13:13? Unfortunately, we can not say for certain. Silvanus is referred to as a “brother” and Mark as “my son”. These designations may serve to reinforce Peter’s image of the Church as a household (4:17). This language is not simply decorative but overthrows Greco-Roman notions of status. The household of God operates on principles quite different than those of the world (note 1:2)

2. “The true grace of God” (5:12) sums up all of God’s dealing with humankind culminating in salvation. The pattern of Christ (suffering and then glory), deliverance from futile ways, purification and the final victory of Christ over all things are God’s “true grace”. The point of the letter comes to this: “Stand firm in it” (5:12). As we have seen, Peter calls us not to withdraw from our society and not to conform to it but, rather, to stand against it as a witness. This may seem like an overwhelming task given the social opposition Peter’s audience faced. But resistance is possible.
3. “She who is in Babylon” (5:13) probably refers to the church in Rome. Referring to Rome as “Babylon” connects Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon with the Church’s experience of exile in the world (1:1). Of course, Israel was liberated from exile and, Peter wishes us to see, so will the Church.
4. The “kiss of love” (5:14) has become an essential Christian gesture. In Greco-Roman culture it was a sign of kinship, honor and inclusion. It was a gesture exchanged only with one equals. It becomes a sign of the equal status of all Christians without the household of God and a gesture of solidarity. This one gesture provides a summary of the meaning of the Church.