

THE MESSAGE OF FIRST PETER

by Ray C. Stedman

In the month of July in the year 64 A.D., a great fire broke out in the city of Rome and the entire city was engulfed in flames. Hundreds of public buildings were burned to the ground, hundreds of acres were blackened in the city, and thousands of homes were destroyed, so that there were thousands of the inhabitants of the city left homeless. History has concluded that the Emperor Nero set that fire in order that he might destroy the ramshackle buildings of Rome and give him room to erect some marble palaces and other monuments that he thought would establish his name in history. It was during this time, of course, that the story was born that Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but it has since been conclusively proved that the violin was not invented at that time. What he played is hard to tell, but it is pretty clear from some of the contemporary historians that the Emperor was seen looking over the city and enjoying the view while it was burning. There are some who claim that when the fire was put out in one part of the city, suddenly and mysteriously it was lit again, so the historians of that day seem to be almost unanimous in concluding that Nero did burn down the city.

The populace was incensed, they were ready to revolt and overthrow him, so Nero quickly looked around for a scapegoat that he could blame for the fire. There was in Rome a group of people who were just in the right situation to lend themselves to take the blame for the fire. They were called Christians. They followed a man named Christ, about whom strange things were said, and they themselves did very strange things. Rumors were flying all around Rome that they were cannibals, because they talked about getting together in their houses, drinking someone's blood and eating his body. They spoke about "love feasts," -- at which they greeted one another with a holy kiss, and shared their innermost problems with each other. This soon became enlarged into stories of sexual orgies. So they were a people already under deep suspicion. When the Emperor needed a scapegoat, therefore, he started the rumor around Rome that the Christians had burned down the city.

There were a lot of people who refused to believe that, but there were some who did, and in order to enforce it the Emperor began a very serious series of persecutions against the Christians. It was during this time that Christians were dipped in tar and burned as torches to light the gardens of Nero when he threw an outdoor party. They were tied to his chariot and dragged through the streets of Rome until they were dead. They were thrown to the lions; they were tied up in leather bags and thrown into water so that when the leather bags shrank, the Christians were squeezed to death. In a hundred other delicate ways, Nero sought to impress upon them the folly of being Christians.

Now it was during this time of the outbreak of the persecution of Christians in Rome that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter. And he wrote it, most scholars believe, in Rome to "the exiles," he says, or "the strangers in dispersion:"

... To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. {1 Pet 1:1b-2a RSV}

And thus we get this beautiful and wonderful letter -- what we call *The First Letter of Peter*.

You will notice that, at the close of this letter, Peter says he wrote it from Babylon. There are some who say he meant the literal Babylon on the Euphrates River, but most scholars seem quite agreed that he was using the term that was common in the Christians of that century to refer to Rome, because all of the licentiousness and idolatry and evil of Babylon had now been transferred to the capital of the Roman Empire. So it is very likely that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter from the city of Rome in about 67 A.D. And he wrote it to Christians, mostly Gentile Christians, who were scattered about in cities in the northeast province of what we now call Asia Minor, or Turkey, and to them this letter came. They were being hounded and persecuted all through the Empire because of Nero's proclamation, and so the apostle wrote to encourage them in the face of their

difficulties.

This, then, is one of the letters of the New Testament especially helpful to anybody who is going through some difficulty. If you are facing the problem of suffering of any kind, I would urge you to read First Peter. If you are wondering what God is doing in the world of our day and what is going to happen in the face of all the tensions and pressures and possibilities of terror that await us in the future, this is an excellent letter to read because it was written to Christians under similar circumstances.

Peter begins with the greatest fact in the life of any Christian, his relationship to Jesus Christ with the new birth. Peter says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew ... {1 Pet 1:3a RSV}

That is the greatest thing that ever happens to anyone. When I was a boy I remember Christians giving testimony and very frequently they would say, "The greatest thing that ever happened to me was the day I met Jesus Christ." Well, I was a Christian, but down deep in my heart I did not really believe that it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. It seemed to be a rather minor incident in my life. I did not have any great experience. I was only 10 years old when I came to know Jesus Christ and though it was a very precious thing to me, yet it did not seem to be a very important thing. There were other decisions that I would have to make a little later on that seemed more important, like what kind of work was I going to do, who was I going to marry and where would I live -- a few things like this. But now as I look back over more than half a century, I can say that unquestionably, beyond a shadow of a doubt, far and above every other decision I ever made, that decision I made as a lad 10 years old was the greatest decision of my life. Everything has been related to that some way or another.

Now Peter goes on to point out here why this is true. He says that there are three things about this decision that are extremely significant, which you can get there and no place else. One is a living hope. What a word for this hopeless age! Peter says: (verses 3-5)

... to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, {1 Pet 1:3b-4 RSV}

Did you know you had reservations in heaven already? Now some people say "That is pie in the sky by and by. That is opiate for the masses -- you know, to keep us happy while we struggle along down here." That is what Karl Marx told the world. And I suppose it can be looked at that way, in a sense. Yet when you see young people who ought to be filled with a sense of life and living, lying sometimes for hours like zombies, corpses in our public parks because they have nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to live for, you can see what a living hope does. It activates us. It motivates us now. This is a great thing about Christianity. If you take away the hope of another world, another life, you destroy the meaning of this life. So Peter begins there.

But that is not all. He says that we not only have a living hope, but present power. We are kept by the power. Verse 5:

who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed ... {1 Pet 1:5a RSV}

A present power. A power that sustains us. It grips us when we are in terror or anxiety or need and strengthens us and comes to us in spite of all the obstacles life throws at us.

And third, a rejoicing love, for he says (verse 8):

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. {1 Pet 1:8 RSV}

I hope all of you know what he is talking about here. That kind of quiet joy that fills the heart inside simply

because you know Jesus Christ. Not because of anything he does for you, but because he is, and he lives and loves you, and you love him. Even though you cannot see him you love him.

Now Peter goes on to say that all this has been predicted by the Old Testament prophets. This is not something dreamed up nor imagined -- something that is cooked up in somebody's fantasmagorical pot. It is not a fable, he says a little later on, but it is the truth predicted, and it was confirmed exactly as it was predicted. It occurred that way and thus we can rest upon it. So in this way he encourages us by the fact that we have this inner witness and this outer testimony. These are the grounds upon which Christian faith always rests, in any age or at any time.

Peter goes on to show us that growing out of this there have to be certain changes in our life as a result. If this is what we are, then what we must somehow do is relate to that, or otherwise it really is not happening to us. All that he says and all the New Testament continually says to us is, be what you are. That is all. Just be what you are. Do not be hypocrites. That is being something that you are not. But be what you are.

There are three marks that he sets forth in this letter for these Christians and for us. First he says, "Be holy." Now what do you think when you hear that word holy? Do you think of someone who has been stewed in vinegar? Sour? So pious that he is always mouthing pious sayings and talking about religious things? Is this what holiness means to you? Well, obviously you have missed the whole meaning of it if that is what you think.

Do you know how the Old Testament refers to holiness? It calls it "the beauty of holiness." And there is something beautiful about a holy person because holiness means "wholeness." This is a real person. To me the ingredients of wholeness are basically first, singlemindedness. He is a person who has his eye on a goal. on a person whom he follows, and that person is so thoroughly all-important to him that he is not interested in anything that does not relate to that person. That is singleminded, dedicated. There is something attractive about that. Any time you meet a Marine who takes pride in his outfit you can see the kind of singlemindedness I am talking about. He is proud that he is a Marine, and he walks like it and he talks like it.

Now there is that same quality about a Christian who understands his Lord. He is holy, in the sense that he is dedicated. And then he is at peace with himself. He is not struggling with anyone, or certainly not within himself. He is at rest. He is adjusted. He does not get upset when everything around him starts crumbling apart. That is what holiness is.

Then he is interested in you. He is outgoing. He is not always thinking about himself and his likes and concerns and his comfort. But he is thinking about yours, and how you are doing. They are a most attractive kind of people to be around. I love holy people. I wish all you were holy. It would be so much fun coming to church!

Then Peter says, "Be fearful." Yes, he does. (Verses 17-19):

And if you invoke as Father him who Judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, {1 Pet 1:17-19a RSV}

What does he mean "fearful?" Well, he means have an honest respect for the kind of Being God is. Remember whom you are dealing with. You are not dealing with another man who can be fooled by your actions and attitudes. You are dealing with One who knows you more thoroughly than you know yourself, and he is no respecter of persons. You cannot buy his favor. You cannot trick him into treating you differently than he treats anyone else. You cannot become his favorite. God does not act that way. Now if you begin to play fast and loose with him, the results that he says will happen will happen to you just as surely as to anyone else.

Now that kind of a being knows us so well that it kind of frightens you, doesn't it. That is what Peter means. Conduct yourself with fear, remembering that you are dealing with One you cannot fool. Therefore, be honest, remembering that you have been bought, not with things men use in the market, but with something that no

one else could have given, the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

And third, as a result of belonging to him, he says, be priests. Chapter 2, verse 4:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices ... {1 Pet 2:4-5a RSV}

This, by the way, is the answer to the question that many people ask today. What did Jesus mean when he said to Peter, "Peter, your name is Peter, and upon that rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now, we know that the word "Peter" means "rock," and the Catholic Church tells us that Jesus meant that he was going to build his church upon Peter. But Peter says, "No." He was there. He ought to know. He says, "Jesus is the rock." And every believer who comes to Christ is like a stone built upon that rock, that great underlying rock upon which God is erecting the building called the church today. But Jesus is that rock, and you are built up upon him like stones upon the great rock in order that you might be a priesthood, says Peter, in order to offer something unto God, something that God greatly desires and wants. What is it? What can you give God that he wants that he doesn't have? Think of that. What can you and I, mere human beings in this great universe give to the One who flung the stars out into space -- something he very much wants. What is it? Here Peter tells us. (verse 9)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. {1 Pet 2:9 RSV}

That is what God wants. He wants you to talk about what he has done for you and tell others what he is like to you. And when you do you offer a sacrifice unto God that is like a sweet-smelling offering and a savor of worship unto him.

Peter now goes on now to deal with the more practical aspects of life. He deals with how they should live their life as citizens. Here these people were living in the Roman Empire, and under this persecution, and yet they had certain obligations. In chapter 2, verse 11 and on, he deals with these obligations. He says as citizens submit yourself to the government and the powers that be. Verse 17:

Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear [love] God. Honor the emperor. {1 Pet 2:17 RSV}

What emperor? Nero, who drags Christians around behind his chariot and burns them as living torches in his garden? Honor the emperor? In these days when young people, even sometimes Christian young people, think they have the right to take the law into their own hands, disobey the powers that be, and do so in the name of God, ought to read a passage like that and remember that it was of the very emperor who was causing the heartache among Christians that Peter wrote these words, "Honor the emperor."

Then he talks on about servants.

Servants, be submissive to your masters. [Do not boycott them or riot against them or demonstrate] ... not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. {1 Pet 2:18-19 RSV}

And then he reminds them of the example of the Lord Jesus. He says, "That is what he did." Verse 23:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; {1 Pet 2:23a RSV}.

He committed himself unto the Lord.

Then he moves from that into the home. Just as the Lord took the unjust treatment that was accorded to him, he says,

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands. {1 Pet 3:1a RSV}

-- even though they are not always right.

Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives. {1 Pet 3:7a RSV}

-- even though they sometimes nag you and disturb you and bother you, "bestow honor on them," just as you Christians are to honor this monstrous wretch who sits on the throne of Rome, where Peter says: so you husbands should honor your wives. Verse 8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. {1 Pet 3:8 RSV}

That is the mark of a Christian in society.

Then comes this difficult passage about spirits in prison and baptism now saving you and all these things many have struggled over. But the key to that whole passage in chapter 3 is verse 18.

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. {1 Pet 3:18a RSV}

That is the key. He did this in order that he might bring us to God. Christ underwent suffering. He came in the flesh. He died in the flesh. He did all this that he might accomplish the great end that he might bring us to God.

Now this reminds Peter of the way the gospel was preached in Noah's day and how the Spirit of Christ, speaking through Noah, preached to the people of his day in order that he might bring them to God. But they refused, and so the ark came in as a picture of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ to carry them over the floods of judgment and bring them to God. Baptism, which is also a picture relating to the ark, now saves us just as the ark saved Noah. Baptism (not water baptism, and it says so, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but the baptism of the Spirit which puts us into the ark of safety, our Lord Jesus) is that which now saves us as an appeal to God from the clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you read the passage in that light, I believe you will have no difficulty with it.

So Peter concludes this matter of suffering, exhorting the Christians to remember that though they walk in honesty and faithfulness to God, not living like the Gentiles do, and all of the biblical writers say this, "You are to no longer live like the Gentiles do but you are to return good for evil." That is the idea. We are not to be concerned about our own satisfaction and our own rights. We are so concerned aren't we, that we get what we have coming. This is the spirit of our age, that we get our rights, that everything we have coming, we receive. But this is not the spirit of a Christian, and we Christians must learn that and begin to operate on that level because until we start acting like Christians, we have no testimony at all before the law. If we start insisting upon our rights, even in little ways, we cancel out what witness we have.

You have perhaps read of the story of the boy who got concerned about all the work he had to do around the house. So one morning he laid beside his mother's breakfast plate a little list of things: for mowing the lawn, \$1.00, for cleaning the room, 50 cents, for vacuuming the rug, 50 cents, and several other things and then he drew a total and put it down there and laid the bill beside his mother's plate. And she read it. She did not say anything. But the next morning he found a list beside his plate. It said: for washing your clothes, no charge; for fixing your meals, no charge; for taking care of your room, no charge, and a list of other things. And then she drew a total and wrote underneath, "No charge. Done out of love." She laid it beside his plate. That day he did everything he had to do in the house without a word of complaint. He got the point.

This is what a Christian is to do. He returns good for evil. And this letter of Peter's is to people who are undergoing real punishment.

The last section deals with life in the Body of Christ. It is a wonderfully helpful section that starts with chapter

4, verse 7

The end of all things is at hand: {1 Pet 4:7a RSV}

And if that was applicable to his day, think what it is for today.

... therefore ... {1 Pet 4:7b RSV}

What is the first thing now? What if the Lord came next year? What if we are at the end of the age? "The end of all things is at hand." What is the first thing that ought to be said? Well, Peter says it,

... keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: {1 Pet 4:7c-10 RSV}

That is his program for the end of the age. It does not look tremendously impressive in the eyes of the world but it is tremendously impressive in the eyes of heaven. And this is what will accomplish the will of God --

... that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. {1 Pet 4:11b RSV}

And then he speaks about the suffering and the way to rejoice, because we share Christ's sufferings -- not to suffer as a wrongdoer but to rejoice in the fact that God is at work.

Peter then speaks of the mutual ministry of the elders to the members, and the members one to another. And he closes his letter (5:10):

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. {1 Pet 5:10 RSV}

Can you ask anything better than that?

To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {1 Pet 5:11 RSV}

Well, those are wonderful words, aren't they, for people living in the close of an age? Let us take them to heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this look from the first century to us in this twentieth century. We pray that these words which were true then and are still equally true today may find a response in our hearts, young and old alike. Lord, help us to remember that we are strangers and exiles. This is not our home, even though we are temporarily assigned here on duty. Help us to be faithful to you and obedient to your Word and responsive to your grace and your love until Him whom we have not yet seen but love with a full heart shall welcome us and restore to us more than all we could have ever dreamed of above that which we think has been taken away. We ask in his name, Amen.

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