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PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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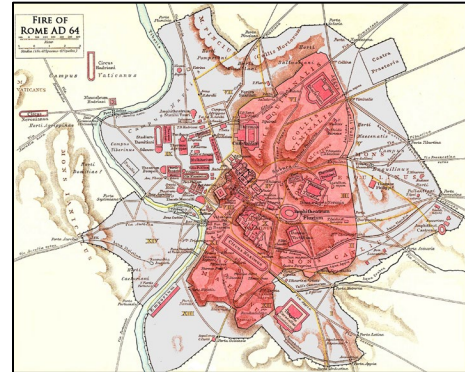
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## **The Valley of Suffering**

1 Peter was written at the start of the Neronian Persecution.

On July 18, 64 AD fire broke out in the commerce section of Rome and spread throughout the wooden structures of the city. It raged for six days and seven nights destroying 70% of the city of Rome! The citizens of Rome blamed Nero for setting the fire and then watching it burn (that was the rumor). In fact, the backlash Nero faced was so severe that to relieve the pressure, he placed the blame for the fire on Christians who had become an increasingly large population in Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded the following:



Therefore, to scotch the rumor [that he was behind the fire], Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit [the clothes] of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. (Tacitus, 2008, pp. Book 15, Ch. 44)

And so began the Neronian persecution which spread throughout the empire- eventually impacting Christians in all the lands over which Rome ruled — including the churches of Asia Minor, the recipients of this letter!

Now I have sought to be careful in my descriptions of this persecution, for it is not at all clear how advanced it was in Asia Minor at the writing of this epistle. From 1 Peter 1:6-9 it appears that it had already begun in part. Yet, from 1 Peter 2:11-4:11 it seems as though it was in its early stages.<sup>1</sup> Yet by the time we get to our text this morning, all doubt is removed...

1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, // which comes upon you [present tense] for your testing..."

Clearly, at the writing of this text the Neronian persecution had come in its fullness to Asia Minor such that God's people now were suffering under a "fiery ordeal"! The expression refers to the agonizing experience of burning with fire (Revelation 18:9, 18). Because Peter used the definite article, "the," it is clear he had in mind a particular circumstance/event!

It is this that sets apart this final section (1 Peter 4:12-5:14). As such, we must see that it was

written in a “bunker” with the bombs of persecution rattling the structure, threatening all inside! Accordingly, the perspective of the text before us was written In the Valley of Suffering in which Peter gives seven truths to govern our thinking in the midst of trial. Notice with me the first one: Suffering is not incompatible with a loving God.

1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you...”

We know from Christ’s teaching that...

Matthew 5:18b, “...until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.”

In other words, every word of the Bible is God-breathed, intended, and so important! That is why when Peter began this section on suffering with, “Beloved,” we do NOT take this simply as a verbal filler. RATHER, its use is very intentional here! The assurance of God’s love is so necessary In the valley of suffering.

Psalms 119:75-76, “I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me. O may Thy lovingkindness comfort me, according to Thy word to Thy servant.”

And so, as God’s people endured horrible abuse, Peter’s first word of encouragement was to assure them that that they were the “beloved of God” — which means that their current suffering was NOT because God was angry with them or no longer loved them!

Consider the word, “beloved” (ἀγαπητός [*agapētos*]). It literally means, “Loved ones” and is used 61 times in the New Testament, most of which are in reference to one’s status before God. Paul addressed the book to the Romans this way:

Romans 1:7a, “To all who are beloved of God in Rome...”

Speaking of the Jewish people who at that time were still in covenant with God (In other words, prior to 70 AD), Paul wrote this:

Romans 11:28, “From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God’s* choice they are beloved...”

Listen to how John referenced his brethren:

1 John 3:2a, “Beloved, now we are children of God...”

And so it is here! Peter began this very important exhortation addressed to ones in the “crucible of suffering” (cf. 1 Peter 1:7) by affirming their status before God! Their trials and difficulty were NOT an indication that God had forsaken them or had rejected them on account of some sin. RATHER, they were and would always be “The beloved of God”!

Now in the context of tragedy, trial, or suffering, it is natural to ask — as I'm sure many in Asia Minor at this point did — “How is my current experience of trial and difficulty consistent with the love of God? If God loved us, you'd think He'd ordain an easier life! To answer this, we have to go back to the beginning in Genesis.

Genesis 1:27, “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

For the sake of time, I am going to summarize here. When God created this world, he gave man a special endowment (made in His image), a special relationship with Himself (we call a covenant), and so a glorious calling to co-reign with God over creation. As such, in the garden the Lord “walked with man in the cool day” (Genesis 3:8). From this I want you to see that man was created to have a special relationship with God such that the best thing that could ever happen to man — you and me — is for us to come to a fuller understanding of who God is and enjoy Him as a result! Is that NOT the essence of the life we have in Christ?

John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”

Knowing Christ — growing in our understanding of Him — most certainly is “very good”!

Yet as unfallen beings, we could never begin to appreciate and so understand the true nature of a loving, kind, and gracious God. In the garden, man/Adam most certainly could understand that God is awesome, holy, transcendent (which is why the angels serving in the presence of God repeat in awe, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” [Isaiah 6:3]!).

Yet when it comes to what I call God's “Kind Attributes” (His love, compassion, mercy, longsuffering, kindness, grace, goodness, and the like), God's people in the garden could NOT begin to comprehend much less apprehend this facet of God's character. That is why unfallen angels must watch God's interaction and relationship with redeemed sinners in order to learn about God's Kind Attributes (cf. Ephesians 3:10)!

Truly, we could never have come to know of the love of Christ if it wasn't for the Fall and His glorious redemption. Paul describes it this way:

Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Biblical love could only be understood in the context of ones who were unworthy of it. For by definition, that is biblical/divine love!

Now here is THE most important facet of this explanation, God's redemptive program did NOT

come to completion upon the first coming of Christ, the redemption of man, or the real-time transformation of a sinner into a saint! It will NOT come to completion until this earth is destroyed and remade and we once again are “walking with Christ in the cool of the day” in a New Heavens and Earth! listen to Peter’s exhortation:

2 Peter 3:10-13, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”

Truly, God’s redemptive program for you and me will NOT be completed until we are glorified. Speaking of this salvation, Paul wrote speaking of God’s love for the believer:

Romans 8:29a, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son...”

That is the end of redemption — full conformity to the person of Christ! When will this occur? Not until His second coming. So John wrote it this way:

1 John 3:2, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.”

Truly, though today we have been saved by the blood of the Lamb, we will NOT enter into the fulness of that salvation until Christ’s Second Coming and the Re-Creation of this world into a paradise! Until then, we are in process; our redemption is NOT complete; we will continue to “know in part” until the next age (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:10)!

Because this is the case — and this is THE key question — how does “love” respond to an incomplete being? It completes it! C. S. Lewis describes it this way:

It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms. With friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes.

He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense. (Lewis, 2015, p. 33)

We see this in Hebrews where the Hebrew writer quotes Proverbs 3:12:

Hebrews 12:6-10, “...‘whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom

He receives.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons [as we have seen, more than anything the essence of our relationship with God is that of a son/daughter- which brings with it a massive obligation on the part of a loving God!]; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, that we may share His holiness.”

Do you understand? A loving Being will NOT allow ones whom He loves to remain imperfect. This is the obligation/liability of love! This means that as long as we are the “loved of God” we will be tempered and tried! Let me give you another C. S. Lewis quote:

I find a good many people have been bothered by... our Lord’s words, ‘Be ye perfect’. Some people seem to think this means ‘Unless you are perfect, I will not help you’; and as we cannot be perfect, then, if He meant that, our position is hopeless. But I do not think He did mean that. I think He meant, ‘The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less.

Let me explain. When I was a child I often had toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother- at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more... (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1960, pp. 173-174)<sup>2</sup>

This is what God does with ones He loves- otherwise known as “His beloved”! As His redeeming work will never be completed on this side of the grave, we can be sure that if we are saved, God is going to temper us with trial NOT because He is angry with us, BUT because He loves us! From this you must see that trials — when suffered on account of righteousness- are an indication of God’s love- “whom the Lord loves He disciplines” (Hebrews 12:6)!

Christian, you must see that as long as we remain in this age, it will be “for discipline that we endure” (Hebrews 12:7). A loving God would do nothing less!

And so, in the heat of the crucible with their world falling apart around them, Peter began this section with the very important reminder that we are the “beloved of God”! In the words of MacArthur:

Such love provides a sweet pillow for believers’ weary souls to rest on in the midst of trials and persecutions. (MacArthur, 2004, p. 294)

That brings us to a second truth to govern our thinking in the midst of trial: We ought not to be surprised by suffering.

1 Peter 4:12b, d, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.”

In 1 John 3:13 we are told not to “wonder ... if the world hates you.” Here the idea is stronger: “Do not ‘think it is foreign’ [or] strange!”

Beyond the loving discipline we will undergo as God’s children, we must understand that in Christ we have become enemies of this world and so will be persecuted.

John 15:18-20a, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...”

Paul wrote to the Philippians:

Philippians 1:29, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”

And as he himself faced his own mortality as he soon was to be executed on account of Christ during the Neronian Persecution, Paul told Timothy this:

2 Timothy 3:12, “And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

These are but a few of the many, many promises and warnings in Scripture which tell us that life in this state will involve persecution! As such, we must NEVER “...be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you”!

And yet, at most times we are! We live in a peaceful land which lulls us to sleep such that we think “this vile world is a friend of grace to help us on our way!” (Red Trinity Hymnal #573)<sup>3</sup>

I love how Peter Davids put it, “Unlike the Jews who had for generations been a foreign and culturally distinct minority in the diaspora (and suffered as all such minorities suffer) and since the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (cf. 1 and 2 Maccabees) had had a developed theology of suffering and martyrdom, these Gentile converts had no experience of being a cultural minority. Before their conversion they were perfectly at home in their city. And instead of rebelling against God they had accepted the gospel message. But now they were experiencing cultural isolation and personal hostility, not what they might

have expected as the blessing of God. Well might they have wondered if something had not gone wrong. Thus our author reassures them: persecution is not something ‘strange’ or foreign to their existence as Christians. What is happening is right in line with Christ’s predictions (Matt. 5:11–12; 10:34; Mark 13:9–13; John 15:18–20).” (Davids, 1990, p. 164)

In fact, Peter is using a play on words here with “surprised” (ξεπίζω [*xenizō*]) and “strange thing” (ξένος [*xenos*]). Both obviously come from the same root ξέν- (*xen-*) which is the Greek word for that which is “strange” or “abnormal.” Peter says, “Don’t be estranged as if suffering were strange!” Think of it: in Christ we have been “delivered out of this evil age” (Gal. 1:3) such that we now are “aliens and strangers” in this world (cf. 1 Peter 1:1). In other words, this is NOT our home!

And so, as servants of Christ, we don’t “fit” into this world. In fact, the more we grow in Christ, the more “alien” we will feel when it comes to its amusements, concerns, values, and what it calls a crisis!

Take our nation’s recent response to COVID, Black Lives Matter, White Guilt, Gender Identity, the LGBTQ agenda, and more. Please know, I am NOT here seeking to initiate a dialogue about these issues. RATHER, I simply am pointing out that most if not all of us here think about these issues quite differently than our non-Christian co-workers, friends, and family! So much so, we might even feel like an alien living in a strange land!

If that is the case, don’t be shocked! In Christ, we truly have become *Contra Mundum*. And so:

- If you are persecuted for loving, serving, and knowing Christ...
- If with Lot your soul is “...oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men” (cf. 2 Peter 2:7) such that you feel that your soul is “tormented day after day with *their* lawless deeds”...
- If the non-Christian is “...surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excess of dissipation, and they [will] malign *you*” (1 Peter 4:4)!

Don’t be surprised! Our citizenship is NOT of this world (Philippians 3:20-21)! We don’t belong here!

## References

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recall that 1 Peter has three main sections. (1) A Doctrinal Section in which Peter gave the foundation upon which God's people were to rest their confidence and faith, 1 Peter 1-2:10. (2) A Practical Section in which Peter gave a series of exhortations on how God's people were to live in a hostile world, 1 Peter 2:11-4:11. We know this section ends at 4:11 because Peter utilized a doxology which in the NT is typically placed at the close of literary units. For example, at the close of his doctrinal teaching, right before he transitioned into exhortations on practical Christian living, Paul wrote, "Now to Him... be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20) And so it is in 1 Peter at the close of the middle section. Speaking of Christ, Peter wrote, speaking of Christ, "...to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." [1 Peter 4:11b] Thomas Schreiner added, "A new section of the letter begins here. This is evident because the previous section closes with a doxology, and the new section is introduced by 'dear friends' (agapētoi) and an imperative as was the new section in 2:11." [1, 2 Peter, Jude, NAC, pp. 217–218] (3) That brings us to the final section of this epistle, 1 Peter 4:12-5:14. Many commentators take it as a "Summary Section" in which Peter expands upon some of the earlier teaching of this epistle; and in some ways that is correct. However, what sets this section apart is that seems to have been written when the persecution was advanced.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis further added, "Long ago, before we were born, when we were inside our mothers' bodies, we passed through various stages. We were once rather like vegetable, and once rather like fish: it was only at a later state that we became like human babies. And if we had been conscious at those earlier stages, I daresay we should have been quite contented to stay as vegetable or fish... Something the same is now happening at a higher level. We may be content to remain what we call 'ordinary people': but He is determined to carry out a quite different plan." (*Mere Christianity*, pp. 173-174)

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Swindoll wrote, "Ironically, a lot of Christians believe they should be fireproof. Their first reaction is just the thing Peter rejects—surprise! Too often I hear objections like, 'I can't believe this is happening to me!' or 'Why doesn't God protect me from these things?' or 'Why is God allowing this to happen now?' But Peter responds to this normal reaction of surprise with an important reminder: the fiery ordeal comes on believers for their testing. Like refining fire that tests and purifies gold, separating the precious metal from its impure contaminants, the fire of trials test and purify us deep within." (*Insights on James and 1 & 2 Peter*, SNTC, p. 228)