

The Book of I Peter

In the year 64, the city of Rome was huge. Between 750 000 and a million people lived in it, in a highly dense, compact area, probably less than 24 square kilometres. That year, a fire broke out in the Coliseum and strong winds spread the fire to the rest of the city. By the time the fire had been extinguished, seven of the fourteen sections of Rome had been destroyed. Even though emperor Nero worked hard to extinguish the fire and provided shelter for the homeless in his own gardens, there was always a suspicion that he had started the fire. Many believed that Nero didn't like the look of Rome and wanted to rebuild much of it according to his designs.

As the suspicions grew, Nero needed a scapegoat. He needed someone to blame. Nero chose to focus on a group of people who were already somewhat unpopular in the Roman Empire: the Christians.

To be a Christian in the Roman empire did not help your social standing.

First of all, when Romans asked who was this Christ that the Christians name themselves after, the answer was, "he was a rebel against Rome that one of our governors, Pontius Pilate, executed." So here was a group of people who took the name of a condemned criminal as their title.

Second, and more offensive, was the fact that these Christians claimed that all other gods were false or non-existent, and that only their God was the true God, and their faith was the true faith. All the other religions were happy to accept that other gods and other religions of other cultures also had their place. But these Christians went around saying that Christ is the only way to the only true God. Since Julius Caesar, the emperor had been regarded as divine in some way, a kind of god, and part of your civic duty at some point was to simply burn some incense at one of the thousands of pagan temples throughout the empire and confess the words "Caesar is Lord". But the Christians wouldn't do that.

Third, Christians appeared to be disloyal. Some of them refused to serve in the Roman army, which was the absolute pride of the Roman people. They seemed to undermine the whole idea of slavery because they had Christian masters and Christian slaves eating at the same Table in their meetings, calling each other "brother".

Fourth, there were rumours of terrible things that these Christians did. Some said they had a ceremony where they ate the body and drank the blood of someone. Often they met in the tombs of the city, and at night.

So Christianity was not in favour. Not only so, but by the year 60, it was clear that Christianity was a separate religion from Judaism, Judaism was licensed and tolerated by Rome, but Christianity was not.

So, Nero decided to blame the fire on the Christians. The Roman historian Tacitus describes how this unfolded.

"Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace...Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind..."

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car."

Property was confiscated, privileges were taken away, imprisonment and executions followed. Christians were suffering the worst kind of persecution they had faced.

But before this broke out, a letter had prepared them, and Christians in other parts of the empire, for the trial they were about to face. It was a letter written in their city, the city of Rome, by the apostle whom Jesus named as the rock. Verse 1 of chapter 1 names him: Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. In about the year 62 or 63, he wrote this letter, particularly for Christians who had likely been expelled from Rome about 12 years earlier, and had been sent to some Roman colonies in modern-day Turkey. Peter was in Rome, as we see in 5:13. Babylon (5:13) is generally considered to be a reference to the city of Rome. The Mesopotamian Babylon was mostly deserted at the time of writing. The Egyptian Babylon was a military outpost with no evidence of a Christian presence until much later. Peter likely knew the suffering these believers were facing, just as he knew of the general suffering Christians experienced within the Roman empire. And it no doubt became a pillar of strength for the Christians in Rome who faced terrifying persecutions under Nero.

But the letter was not only for them, but would circulate through the empire, helping Christians everywhere as they faced suffering. And it remains the clearest and most direct word on suffering in the New Testament.

Everyone is going to face some suffering. If you're a Christian, then you will face suffering in three areas, two of which you share with everyone else in the world, one of which is unique to Christians. The first area is suffering because of the Fall. If you live in this fallen world, you will have some share in the pain of a world under the curse, under judgement, and under the sway of Satan. Whether it be the suffering of sickness or physical pain, poverty and struggle, abuse and corruption by others, natural disasters, accidents and calamities, the death of loved ones, crime, harm and pain inflicted upon you by the sin and evil of others – you will have your fair share of this. “Yet man is born to trouble, As the sparks fly upward.” (Job 5:7)

The second area is suffering because of your Faults. In addition to what is simply coming to us in a fallen world, we often add to our suffering by our own sins and foolishness. A terrible financial decision can inflict suffering on you for years to come. A sinful moral choice can bring bitter consequences for decades. Your own actions in your family, in your marriage, in the workplace have results, and the pain of bad choices, sinful decisions, foolish ideas can increase our suffering. Much of the suffering that happens in relationships is caused by our faults. ²⁰ For what credit *is it* if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this *is* commendable before God. (1 Peter 2:20)

The third area is suffering because of your Faith. This kind of suffering is what the Christians in Rome under Nero faced. It's what believers in North Korea right now face. It's what believers in Nigeria and Sudan and the DRC are facing. It is what you face when either your identity as a Christian or your convictions as a Christian cause you to lose work, or lose face, or lose status, or lose friends, or lose family. And some of it, can be, as Job faced, suffering that comes your way from Satan, permitted by God because you are a Christian, and your faith is placed under the blowtorch.

These aren't strictly separated; they're more like three circles that overlap with each other.

Now suffering because of the Fall, because of your Faults, and because of your Faith, adds up to a fair amount of suffering. So what do you do when you suffer? The Bible has a deep and sophisticated doctrine of suffering from Genesis to Revelation: explanations of what suffering is, why we suffer, and even how we suffer. First Peter is a massive contribution to the doctrine of suffering. It not only tells us the reason and purpose for suffering, but it explains what should happen when a true child of God faces this suffering. Peter tells us that this is exactly why he wrote

his letter.

By Silvanus, our faithful brother as I consider him, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God in which you stand. (1 Peter 5:10–12)

Silvanus is another form of the name Silas. Silas was Peter's amanuensis; that is, he wrote down what Peter dictated. Here he tells you what the letter was about.

The true grace of God, i.e. true salvation in which a believer stands, gives the believer a living hope to face suffering. As a Christian, the saving grace and empowering grace of being a child of God affects the meaning you place upon this suffering, and it should give you a very different response to the suffering. You experience it differently. Suffering is not less painful, but what you have *in* it, and *because of* it, and in the future as a *result of it* means you respond in different ways, you interpret the whole thing with different eyes, you show the world a very different reaction to suffering.

So what is that big difference that salvation brings?

Peter structures his letter in three parts, showing us how the grace of salvation gives us something for our suffering: preparedness for your suffering (before), a posture in your suffering (during), and a promise for your suffering (beyond).

I. Preparedness for Your Suffering: The Grace of Hope (1:2-2:12)

In this first section, Peter wants you as a believer to drink in certain truths about the grace of salvation that are going to strengthen you, encourage you, and sustain you when the painful trials come.

So he begins by helping us to understand just how radically different you are since you have been saved. You have a completely new position in Christ: born again, guaranteed a place in heaven, a kept by the power of God.

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)

Now the result of knowing that you have been chosen, forgiven, sealed by Father, Son and Holy Spirit, born again, eternally secure, sustained in faith is the words of verse 3: a living hope. A living hope.

Biblical hope is not wishful longing. That is the way we use the word hope today. 'I hope it won't rain'. But biblical hope is joy arising from complete confidence in the future. Biblical hope is absolute certainty that things will work out in our favour, in Christ. It's joy in advance. It is delighting over what has been promised, knowing how certain the promise is.

Now usually when someone suffers, one of the first things that goes is hope. When people suffer they begin to despair, and ask, "Why is this happening to me? What have I done wrong? What happened to my life?" People look for a cause, a reason, some thing they should have avoided. And when they can't find it, they lapse into despair and depression. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But *when* the desire comes, *it is* a tree of life." (Proverbs 13:12).

In fact, the only way people make it through suffering is that they have hope during the time.

Dutch Christian Corrie ten Boom was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp with her sister Betsie for hiding Jews. Betsie wasted away, but she told Corrie: “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.” Their hope was not merely in survival, but in Christ’s promises. Corrie was eventually released and spent the rest of her life testifying how hope in God gave them strength to endure unimaginable cruelty.

Now Peter does the same thing. Before and when you suffer, understand the grace of your true position, because it will give you hope. You're a believer in Christ, risen from the dead, with a new nature. He'll keep putting it in different ways: you're a holy people, a royal priesthood, living stones, redeemed, born again, pilgrims.

Be outwardly what you are inwardly. Practice your position. In your distinctness lies your hope. No matter what happens to you, your future in Heaven is reserved for you. God is going to sustain your faith. The suffering is not going to destroy you; it will actually improve you. This suffering is not meaningless. This has purpose. I can go into suffering prepared because I have hope and I have holiness.

See the logic in verse 6, “⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 1:6–7)

If you have this reality within, then the fire of trials is only going to purify your faith, not extinguish it. You go into suffering prepared, armed with a theology of what God's grace in salvation does for you. *In Christ: we are distinct. That gives meaning and hope in our suffering.*

But then Peter adds another layer. He does not only want to show us how to be prepared so that we have hope. He also wants to show us the posture we should have in our suffering.

II. Posture in Your Suffering: The Grace of Humility (2:13-4:11)

From 2:13, Peter now moves to how we live out our lives in various parts of life. In verses 13-17 he tells Christians how to respond to authorities, civil rulers. We would say politicians, judges, policemen. From verses 18-25, he tells Christians how to respond to masters in the workplace: bosses, managers, directors. From 3:1 to 7, he brings it into the home, how Christian wives should respond to husbands, and how husbands should treat wives, and finally, how Christians should treat each other. In all of this, one word keeps coming up: submit. Submit.

Peter teaches that true salvation teaches us the posture of humility and submission. Believers face the suffering of this world, not by proudly and angrily rejecting it, but by submitting to God’s plan in it. This is worked out in submission to various other authorities.

How will this help me in my suffering? In the first place, it will make sure you do not add to your suffering with more sin of your own. When we choose to respond to unfair, unkind, unjust treatment with pride, murmuring, anger, bitterness, revenge, we will only add more suffering to our own plate.

How many times has someone had a terrible boss, or a difficult marriage, or a misunderstanding

with the Law, and he responds with furious anger, insults, revenge, and he only lands himself in hotter water. Now he's been fired, now he's divorced, now he's been charged by the law. None of that would have happened, had he embraced the biblical doctrine of submission.

Peter says, don't add to your suffering with your own sin. Don't respond to sinful treatment with more of the same. Be like Christ, who submitted.

²³ who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; (1 Peter 2:23)

⁹ not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:9)

¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. (1 Peter 4:15)

As we see in the book of Job, sometimes you are not suffering *because* of sin. But often enough, we then start sinning *in* our suffering. Sin didn't *cause* the suffering, but now that the suffering has begun, we *respond* to it sinfully. Usually it is our pride that says, "I don't deserve this suffering, how dare I be treated like this!" One of the best defences against this is humility: the kind that says, I deserve whatever God says I do. Right now, this is what has come my way, and I yield to it.

But the second way that this posture will help us during our suffering is that this kind of posture of humble submission will be a testimony to the unsaved while you suffer.

¹¹ Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11–12)

¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; ¹⁶ having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. (1 Peter 3:15–16)

By adopting this posture of humble submission, suffering becomes an evangelistic opportunity. Unbelievers see something in us that they have not seen before, and they are ashamed of themselves, they become curious about us and ask us a reason for this hope, and they will glorify God if they come to salvation because of it.

All of this can only happen when a believer chooses the posture of submission, of humility when facing authorities, whether those authorities are being kind or harsh, fair or unfair.

Richard Wurmbrand was a Romanian pastor arrested for preaching the gospel under communism. In prison, he was repeatedly beaten and tortured. Yet he quietly prayed for his captors and even showed kindness when possible. In his book *Tortured for Christ*, he recalls how some guards were so struck by the Christians' submissive endurance that they later asked about their faith. His refusal to retaliate, even with words, bore long-term fruit for the gospel.

With humble submission, you get two benefits. You prevent your suffering from getting worse, and you witness to the world.

Of course, we all have questions about what the limits are on this kind of submission, when is self-defence necessary, what about abuse, when should we draw the line – and those are good and important questions, which we'll consider as we study this book. But step one is to get out of the

mindset that always retaliates against bad treatment, always defends itself, always argues, always resists. You're not helping yourself, and you're not showing the world Christ.

Instead, just as the grace of salvation makes us distinct and gives us hope before our suffering, so the grace of salvation enables us to defer – to submit – , and gives us humility in our suffering. A humility that protects us and proclaims Christ.

But the great climax of Peter's book is not just surviving suffering. Peter says that believers have something glorious.

III. Promise in Your Suffering: The Grace of Happiness (4:12-5:11)

Peter brings in a doctrine found in many other places in the New Testament. When Christians suffer, they actually partake, share in, fellowship with Christ in a unique way.

¹² Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but **rejoice** to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding **joy**. (1 Peter 4:12–13)

The idea of sharing, participating, and even exemplifying to the world the sufferings of Christ is taught elsewhere in the New testament.

¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, (Philippians 3:10)

²⁴ I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, (Colossians 1:24)

¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:17)

Now this seems to us to be a strange doctrine. Why should we fellowship with Jesus suffering? Why should we fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Why must we suffer with Him? Isn't the work of Jesus finished on the cross?

Indeed, it is. We can never add a single thing to the sufficient work of Christ on the cross. But it seems that part of God's plan is not to fill the world with mere symbols of the cross, crosses on churches, crosses worn around necks, crosses painted and sculpted as works of art. No, God intends to fill the world with crucifixions. What do I mean? God fills the world with his living people becoming living sacrifices: embracing suffering like Jesus did, and receiving it like He did. God wants real-life, real-time, living reenactments of the cross. Not necessarily the death and violence (though for some Christians it does come to that). But instead Christians who receive unjust, unearned suffering with the meekness of Christ, and show the world that we love not our life or this world more than Christ. We exemplify the Gospel to the world: the the Just One suffered unjustly for the unjust, that they might be justified. In small, fragmentary ways, we give the world a snapshot of the cross in living colour.

And for us, it is a promise. We are never closer to Jesus than when we are on the Calvary Road, and never more rewarded than when we reenact the cross. That's why Peter keeps promising us happiness as we reach out and believe this promise.

Notice all the language of happiness and blessedness and glory.

¹² Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but **rejoice** to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding **joy**.

¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, **blessed are you**, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is **glorified**. (1 Peter 4:12-14)

¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. (1 Peter 4:15)

¹⁶ Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him **glorify** God in this matter. (1 Peter 4:16)

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, *you are blessed*. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." (1 Peter 3:14)

Now the proviso on receiving this promise and experiencing this happiness is that you cannot be suffering for your own faults. You don't get to cause your own trouble by being obnoxious, unreliable, argumentative, difficult, unsubmitive, and then when trouble comes, to claim you are being persecuted for righteousness sake and that this is your Golgotha moment. No, you must be absolutely blameless of contributing to the suffering, and then you can receive this promise and experience the happiness.

In Carthage, North Africa, in the year 202 a group of catechumens (new believers preparing for baptism) were arrested, among them a young noblewoman named Vibia Perpetua, only 22 years old along with her servant Felicitas. She was imprisoned, and because she did not recant, she was sentenced to be executed in the circus.

The crowd roared as wild animals were released. Perpetua was tossed by a wild cow but stood again, straightened her tunic modestly, and helped Felicitas back to her feet.

Finally, the gladiators were ordered to finish them. One young soldier trembled as he approached Perpetua. Seeing his fear, she gently guided the blade to her throat, showing quiet submission to God's will. Her actions not only encouraged thousands of Christians who heard and read about it, but it became a dramatic testimony to the pagans watching.

It was Christ on the cross shown again.

We may not be called to martyrdom, but we may be called to a moment of unfair, unjust treatment, where we will be the only crucifixion of Jesus some people will ever see. And the promise is that in that moment of suffering, a profound joy and happiness will be there: in our eternal reward, and in our likeness to Christ.

I don't know if the prosperity Gospel teachers often preach through 1 Peter. I don't know if the self-esteem gospel teachers often preach through 1 Peter. Because suffering doesn't help their message of health, wealth, and self-love.

But true Christians want to know the true grace of God in which they stand. So they understand that the blowtorch of suffering helps burn off the fake and the phoney so we can see the brilliant shine of the pure gold of true faith. As that blowtorch approaches the real deal, true salvation, 1 Peter will teach us that out comes the gold of hope, out comes the gold of humility, and out comes the gold of happiness.