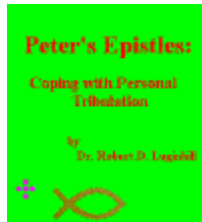


Peter's Epistles #5

Reasons for Christian Suffering

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Revised Translation 1st Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit's consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!

Review of Exegesis: *to those though outcasts dispersed yet selected:* So far we have seen that in employing these two (seemingly) contradictory descriptions of believers, Peter was calling attention to the fact that while our eternal status will be one of unending happiness and blessing, in this life we can expect to be treated as outcasts: we are in the world, but we are not of the world. We have also seen that this is all part of God's plan for us. In phase I of the Plan of God, we believe in Jesus Christ and are saved; in phase III of the Plan of God, we receive a new, perfect body at the resurrection, and will live forever with God in perfect peace and happiness. But in phase II (the believer in time), we find ourselves still here in the devil's world, and still subject to pain, suffering, and hardships of every sort.

When believers suffer, however, they do so only by the foreknowledge of God (as, indeed, in verse one above, we are described as *outcasts according to the foreknowledge of God*). God is aware of every problem we shall ever had. In fact, He knew about the suffering we would encounter when He devised His plan in eternity past. Peter is telling these first century believers and us that God knows about our problems. *There is a reason* why we suffer as believers, and God always has our best interests in mind when He allows us to undergo suffering. We should, therefore, never forget that, "for (we) who love God, God works all things together for good, to those called according to His plan" (Rom.8:28). If we fail to remember the doctrinal facts about suffering, we, like the believers whom Peter is writing to, run the risk of being distracted by suffering. We may forget that God loves us, watches over us, and is actively involved in every detail of our lives. It is also important to distinguish between suffering for

correction (*divine discipline*) and suffering for growth (the *suffering of believers*, or "sharing the sufferings of Christ"). Since every aspect of the believer's life is important in God's plan, all our suffering necessarily falls into one of these two categories (for while it is true, as we saw in lesson #4, that *general human suffering* is the legacy of the fall of man, the believer's life is directly superintended by God). If what we are experiencing by way of suffering is really undeserved, it will be to our benefit in many ways, even if we do not see this clearly at the time. If, on the other hand, we are experiencing *divine discipline*, the solution is confession.

Confession of Sin: We have seen that by simply turning to God in prayer to acknowledge our sins, these sins are forgiven and we are cleansed (1Jn.1:9). Sin we should note, comes in three essential categories:

- (1) sins of the hand (i.e., overt sins such as theft; e.g. Ex.20:15)
- (2) sins of the tongue (such as slander; e.g. Col.3:8)
- (3) sins of the heart (such as anger; e.g. Gal.5:20)

As Paul reminds us, "all sin and come short of God's glory" (Rom.3:23), so from time to time, all believers will find it necessary to make use of 1st John 1:9 and confess their sins to God (cf. also 1Jn.1:10). It is important to remember that the critical factor in confession of sin is not how we may feel about the sin. Naturally, we ought not to feel good about our failures. We want to succeed as Christians and please our Lord and Master in all things. At the same time, however, we must realize that we are forgiven our sins on the basis of God's character because Christ was judged in our place for these very sins we confess. By trying to "work up" an excessive emotional response and by exacerbating normal feelings of guilt, believers run the risk of making themselves the issue, not Christ. So while we do want to try and avoid failure and learn from our mistakes, we need to have the humility to realize that we are imperfect and will never achieve perfection this side of heaven. Therefore we must master the technique of confession of sin, avoiding excessive guilt feelings. We must make it a habit to return quickly to our God when we stray, giving all of our actions close scrutiny at all times, confessing immediately any and all sin, whether overt, verbal, or mental.

Suffering for Blessing: Once we have confessed our sins, even suffering which may have originally resulted from *divine discipline* now becomes *suffering for blessing*, a bearable alternative to punishment from the hand of God.

The first point we should note about all the suffering which God in His love allows to come our way (when there is no unconfessed sin in our lives) is that suffering for believers is *bearable*. 1st Corinthians 10:13 describes suffering as "testing" (Greek *peirasmos* meaning "testing" or "evaluation"). Just as we had examinations in school which were the proof of whether or not we had really mastered the information in a particular course, God, in an analogous manner, gives us "exams" in phase II of His plan. He allows some hardship to come our way in order to see how we may respond. Have we been diligent about learning truth from His word? Will we remember Him and trust Him in our hour of stress and pressure? Or have we been negligent in our biblical studies and the application of truth to our lives, and will we forget that He is well

able to deliver us from whatever problems we may encounter. 1st Corinthians 10:13 tells us that "God will not allow us to suffer beyond what we can endure."

It often seems that some believers get more than their share of suffering. Just remember that you and I have enough trouble evaluating our own lives, so we surely can't tell whether another person's suffering is bearable or not. God knows what will severely strain a person and what will break him. God will often strain us, but He will never break us. If we rebel against God (and fall into repeated sin, refusing to confess that sin) then our suffering will be unbearable, but as long as we are moving forward in God's plan for our lives, confessing the sin we commit, and attempting to grow spiritually, we have God's promise that we will never have to face anything which we cannot handle.

The second point brought out by 1st Corinthians 10:13 is that God will also provide "a way of escape" from suffering or problems. The Greek word *ekbasis* means literally "a way out". The following phrase ("so that you might be able to endure it") tells us that the "way out" may lead "through" as well as "around" the suffering. This means that when we pray to God for relief in suffering, that relief will come, but it may not be immediate. Suffering (and the testing of our faith which it involves) is an integral part of God's plan for our lives in phase II (time). In fact, without suffering, there really could be no spiritual growth, and certainly no demonstration of spiritual progress.

Next we shall examine the specific role which suffering plays in the Christian's spiritual advance.

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