

What's in It for Us?

DAVE BAST

The Gospel makes incredible promises to those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ. It offers us grace and peace and joy and hope. It says we have eternal life here and now, as well as later in heaven; and oh, it promises one other thing here and now – suffering. Jesus says that those who follow him will have tribulation, which is a fancy word for trouble, pain, sorrow. So, let's talk about the dark side of the Christian life – the part that is not much fun. Let's talk about Christian suffering.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and today I am joined by Scott Hoezee and Meg Jenista. Welcome, Meg. Welcome, Scott.

MEG JENISTA

Thanks, Dave.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is good to be back.

DAVE BAST

So today on *Groundwork*, we are beginning a new series of programs that is going to take us through the first letter of Peter, and Peter is kind of an interesting character in the New Testament. Of course, we all are familiar with him. He is sort of the star of the Gospels – among the disciples, anyway – the followers of Jesus; and then, in the first part of Acts he plays a very prominent role; but he sort of drops out of sight once Paul comes on the scene, at least until we get to the end of the New Testament, now with 1 Peter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and what is interesting about this particular letter... So, he wrote letters – not as many, as near as we can tell, as Paul did – and unlike Paul, he did not write this to a specific congregation. Paul would write to Corinth or Rome, but Peter wrote this to believers everywhere, and he did it because he knew himself, but he knew from reports that he was getting that wherever the followers of Jesus were, they were suffering. They were encountering a hostile world. So, all throughout this first letter he says a lot of different things, but he never strays very far from that theme of suffering. Every few verses he comes right back to it because he knows these people are hurting and they need a way to think about it as Christians.

Meg Jenista:

And the theme of suffering was universal at Peter's time, but it is no less universal today, and it speaks directly to the hearts of Christians and churches around the world today.

DAVE BAST

Right; and probably he was writing somewhere around the year 60, and we know that he was in the city of Rome; he says at the very end of the letter he is writing from Babylon, which was Christian code for Rome; and we know that Silas or Silvanus was with him helping him write the letter, and Mark also, who would write what came to be understood as Peter's Gospel. By this time, the situation had changed significantly for the Christians, and they were clearly marked now as kind of a foreign religion and hostility was aroused

against them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and as you said, Meg, indeed, this letter is specific for the time. One of the things you always need to remember when you are reading – most of the New Testament is letters – epistles – and you are reading somebody else's mail. Peter really did not write this to 21st Century people; but the themes are universal, and the situations have not changed; and so, there is that immediacy to the letters of the New Testament, including Peter, who could indeed be writing this to us today even though it is 2000 years old.

MEG JENISTA

With that introduction, then, let's turn to the greeting at the beginning of 1 Peter, recognizing that it was written to a specific people, but that it is still applicable to us today.

1 Peter Chapter 1: ¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiled, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. ²Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood. Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

DAVE BAST

That is a wonderful beginning; and as I work my way through that, it seems like he begins with a number of identifiers or tags that describe Christians, both then and now; and the first one is God's elect – God's chosen ones. He artfully works the Trinity in there as well: Chosen by God through the sanctifying power of the Spirit in order to obey Jesus Christ – be like him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the great things about the letters is... You know, there are some people today, but throughout Church history, who said: The Church came up with all those doctrines four hundred years later on the Trinity and John Calvin must have been the one who invented this whole idea of election.

DAVE BAST

Yes, anything bad we can lay at his feet, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; I mean, God was a perfectly nice deity until Calvin came along. Not true. Look at all of the theology – and this was within just a few decades of Jesus' death and resurrection – and already, right, we have election, we have the Trinity, we have sprinkled with his blood – kind of a baptism reference – Peter packs in a lot.

DAVE BAST

And atonement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And atonement; it is all right there in two verses. When he is basically saying hello; and look how much he packs in.

DAVE BAST

Right. I especially, Meg, like also then this image of exiles – exiles of the dispersion, or literally the *Diaspora*, which is very suggestive that he uses here.

MEG JENISTA

And I pick up on that as well when he says that they are chosen for obedience in Christ. That they are chosen to be a people, not just that have been set apart and are biding their time until heaven; but that there is a significant work to be done and a significant life of mission and obedience to Christ that is going to characterize their life even as they are exiles in this foreign land.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oftentimes when we think about somebody being chosen by God we sort of – and Frederick Buechner said it is like: Oh, that must be like winning the lottery. What a lucky person to be chosen by God; but if you actually look at the people all through the Bible from Abram on forward, if you could have stopped them at any point in their journey, having been chosen, to ask them how it is going, they probably would have said: It is terrible! It is tough! We are suffering. When God taps you on the shoulder to follow him, life gets more complicated, not easier.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that makes me think of *Fiddler on the Roof*, you know, being part of the chosen people. Of course, Peter's analogy here is quite clear. He is addressing this mixed bag of Christians, and those provinces that he mentions basically cover what today is Turkey. So, it is Jews, Gentiles, people from all kinds of different backgrounds, and he says, in effect really, you are the chosen people of God now. You are the Diaspora scattered throughout the world; and as you said, Scott, being one of the chosen people is often not only a ticket to trouble, but it is a high responsibility of serving and witnessing. Like Tevya says once when he is kind of complaining to God: Hey, can't you choose somebody else for a while? How about that?

MEG JENISTA

Well, and I like the fact that it unifies all of these people who are across the board from all over the place: Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female. It all is bound up together in the fact that they are in Christ and chosen for obedience and striving toward this mission together – experiencing the same thing even though they are scattered around, and it pulls them together – unifies them – and then gives them an opportunity to hear God's word of comfort and encouragement and exhortation in this letter.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, there is one more image that he uses here in the opening verses. It is in the next verse, verse 3, where Peter writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus – new birth – born again. We are the children of God; we are the family of God; as well as being the chosen, the elect, the people of God; and family is a major concept for Peter as well throughout this letter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and like our real families, so Peter knows also within the family of God – within the Church – you do not get to choose who you are related to; and as Peter will go on to reflect elsewhere, and we will see in future programs, sometimes it is your own family members who can cause you the most pain, and we need to talk about that eventually as well; but right, we are a family as well, and all chosen through that new birth into a living hope – it is a lovely phrase – a living hope.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we want to look at that in the next program in more detail – this inheritance that he talks about – because again, you are part of a family, if you are lucky, you get to inherit something, and Peter says what we get to inherit is amazing beyond compare. But, there is one other thing about being part of a family; some families are unpopular in their neighborhood, and Peter says in addition to that inheritance, what we receive as the children of God – as the people of God – as the chosen of God – is suffering; trials of many kinds. It is sort of like being born a Hatfield in a world full of McCoys. That is what happens to Christians, and that is what we want to pursue in just a moment.

Segment 2

MEG JENISTA

You are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Meg Jenista and I am here with Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We are digging into the book of 1 Peter. 1 Peter begins with a wonderful vision of hope, and the reason it begins with

hope is because reality, more often than not, is suffering; in particular, Christian suffering is what concerns Peter and the Church today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and he says that; so, we have looked at the first four verses of 1 Peter 1 – wonderful verses. We noted how much theology is packed in there – that wonderful phrase: We have been given new birth into a living hope. It is kept in heaven for you; but then this, starting at verse 5:

^{4b}It is kept in heaven ⁵for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶And in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

So there it is; wonderful things – a wonderful inheritance – an incredible hope – but for now, we are unpopular in this world, even as Jesus was, and we are going to hurt.

DAVE BAST

And he talks about experiencing grief or sorrow in all kinds of trials. You have probably preached on this passage, on that verse before. I have, and I tended to go straight to, oh, what are the kinds of trials that we experience? Oh, maybe it is sickness or job loss or family struggles or whatever; but that is not really what Peter has in mind, and throughout this letter he is going to keep coming back to this theme of Christian suffering. It is true that we experience various kinds of trials, and they test our faith, but we have to, I think, focus on what Peter's main issue is here, and that is suffering because you are a Christian. One of the reasons why I tend to skate over that and preach about those other things is because very few of us can identify ways in which we suffer simply because we are Christians.

MEG JENISTA

This does not translate very well for the most part into a North American context, and so even in presenting this radio program there is some hesitation because I know that this program is being aired in countries where this is a reality; and for me, in my day-to-day life there are very few times when I suffer for being a Christian. I experience suffering because I am human. I experience suffering because I make mistakes, but very rarely do I experience suffering because I am a Christian. So, there is a sense of hesitation and humility, I would hope, in coming to this text of scripture and realizing how far it is removed in many ways from my own life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, how does it become relevant for us, really?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You were saying a moment ago, Dave, that we tend to go to other kinds of suffering and we talk about cancer or disappointment in our families, and you are right; that is not really what Peter has in mind. Now, it is true that other forms of suffering can be a little bit worse for Christians than for unbelievers because when bad things happen we also ask questions others do not.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we struggle with the problem of evil. Why is God letting this happen to me?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So even general suffering can be made a little bit worse on account of your larger beliefs, but again, what Peter is really talking about is when people look down on you for being a Jesus person – for having this faith; and that can be everything from eye rolling to active persecution to losing your job to getting beat up, as Peter certainly knew something about, along with some of the other disciples; and that is what he wants to talk about, and help the people make sense of throughout this letter.

DAVE BAST

Well, frankly, one of the reasons why I wanted to focus on 1 Peter is because I have been doing a bit of work on it myself, and you graciously agreed to go through 1 Peter in this series of programs with me, but I have an opportunity periodically to meet with Christians who live in Iran, and it is something we do not talk widely about in public, but there are ways of gathering together with believers and encouraging them in their faith. You talk about someone who literally... They do not struggle with how you suffer as a Christian because it is a daily reality; they know all about it; and so I thought probably this letter was as relevant for them as any book in the Bible. Then we look at ourselves and step back and say: Do we have any kind of parallel with that, or is that just something totally foreign?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I do not know about either one of you, but I know in my preaching over the years when this subject would come up, one of the things I would try to emphasize is that we are the body of Christ – the New Testament makes it very clear – one of the things that means is, we never forget about the Christians in Iran. It is easy to do, but we cannot. We need to make that part of our prayer life as Christians in worship services, and we need as preachers to make it part of our preaching to keep that in front of us, that people are actively suffering for being Christians; and if we are blessed to live in a place where that does not happen, then that is great; but, we are the body; we hurt when they hurt, and we have to keep that in mind and read a letter like this accordingly.

MEG JENISTA

This suffering that Peter speaks about in this passage is a voluntary suffering. Most of us do not opt in for cancer or grief and all of those things, but by virtue of aligning ourselves with Christ and with the people of God, we have volunteered to be a part of the suffering; and the Christians in Iran or Nigeria or the Sudan or Indonesia – any of these places – know what that is like – to voluntarily identify themselves with Christ. We have to do some extra work to identify with them.

DAVE BAST

I think you have put your finger on a very significant point. Christian suffering is always avoidable – we could put it that way. You say it is voluntary; negatively, it is avoidable. All you have to do to avoid it is stop identifying yourself publicly as a Christian.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whenever I read this letter and I read these things, and Peter knows that, and then you think about Peter's story, and can he possibly forget the night the rooster crowed when he denied...

DAVE BAST

When he avoided it, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Peter knows it is voluntary. He knows there is a way to get out of it. He did it; and he lived with that shame probably for the rest of his days. So, Peter knew full well what it was to opt out. He did: I tell you, I do not know the man. I do not know Jesus. Never heard of him. That is how you can get out of it, but Peter throughout this letter is saying: Do not do that; and when you do not do that – yes, you are going to suffer, but it is okay. It does not mean you are not a good disciple; it means you are. It is part of the deal.

DAVE BAST

Well, I want to dig a little deeper into the nature of this Christian suffering, and we will do that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to examine 1 Peter to gain a better understanding of Christian suffering. I am Scott Hoezee, and I am here with Meg Jenista and Dave Bast; and we are talking about this theme of suffering, and particularly what kinds of suffering do we experience as Christian believers, and why? Peter has some things to say about that as well.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think the vocabulary that he uses is helpful in getting at his understanding of this. Think of that word *exile* for example. He identifies us as sojourners, to use the older phrase – the idea that we do not really belong, even to our own cultures and societies and countries. We are resident aliens – I think that was a phrase.

Meg Jenista/

SCOTT HOEZEE

Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.

DAVE BAST

Yes, those guys down at Duke used that, didn't they? It is a little harder for us to, in a constructive way, determine how we should be countercultural – what it means. I think one of the problems that Christians in the West have is they decide: Well, I need to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. I need to be a sufferer as a follower of Jesus, so I will go out and do something outrageous, and then I will be experiencing that and I will be close to Jesus. I will be faithful. Peter has something to say about that too that we will look at in a future program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But increasingly, it is true; if you have Christianized your culture or believe that your whole country was directly founded by God on Christian principles, it is a little harder to see the difference between being a citizen and being a disciple; but I think increasingly – and I sometimes think – and I do not want to single out any one group, but I do sometimes think our younger people are increasingly facing this idea of being seen as weird. If you are a virgin – if you do not drink – if you do not do cocaine – if you do not think it is fun to watch pornography – you are weird; and you are looked down on by your peers, and the peer pressure to conform is enormous for college and high school age kids as well.

DAVE BAST

I love Pilgrim's Progress – you know, that old classic that nobody reads. The central scene there is when the Christian pilgrims come to Vanity Fair, and Vanity Fair is the world; and they are turned on immediately in the world, and Bunyan says for three reasons: One, their speech was different; and two, their dress was different. (I think maybe we should apply those things literally today in our culture.) But three, the thing that most set off the people of the world against them was that they did not buy into the values of what was for sale at the fair. We are most profoundly countercultural when we intentionally refuse to buy into the values of the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is another thing Peter goes on to talk about just a little bit later in this first chapter, in verses 15 and 16. He harks back to Leviticus and to God's words to the people of Israel. He says: The one who chose you is holy so you should be holy in all that you do. It is written: Be holy because I am holy – and holy means *different*.

MEG JENISTA

And I think that might be a way that, as North American Christians, we can be different than our culture in the United States, and it is similar in Canada. The idea is that we have been given the right to the pursuit of happiness; and a way to be countercultural is to recognize, like Peter does, that happiness is not a guarantee

in our lives. That holiness is our pursuit, and whatever it takes to be holy, even if that means sacrificing our rights, whether it be life or liberty or the pursuit of happiness, is worth it if we are, in fact, in the end pursuing holiness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To be holy means that you operate with a different set of values. Years ago, a pastor here in Grand Rapids founded a new church, and he did a whole series on the book of Leviticus – all of those holiness laws and rules and regulations are not very exciting, but he premised his series on the question: What difference will it make if we really believe God lives in our midst; which is what Israel was; God lived in the Temple. They had to stay holy so God could fit. Well, now we are temples of the Holy Spirit. We carry God with us. What difference does it make in our living? It ought to make us holy, which these days, I am afraid, is a synonym – another word for odd – out of step.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you are right. One last point, maybe. Scott, you touched on this earlier in the program, but our suffering as Christians is also sympathetic. It is like sympathetic vibrations, you know, when one string begins to hum as another one is plucked. We are part of a family, Peter says, and when one part of the family is really under the gun, we ought to feel that. I heard a remarkable comment, insightful, on this part of 1 Peter from a person who said: So often we think that sin means saying yes to something we ought to say no to; but more likely, it means we sin when we say no and we ought to have said yes to identifying with or embracing another person in their need; and that too is a form of Christian suffering.

So, why should we do it, Peter says. Because it is the only way you will really prove that your faith is real.

MEG JENISTA

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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