

How Can We Find Peace In The Midst Of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

When I was a boy I was taught that America was a Christian country. I was taught that our Founding Fathers were dedicated to the God of the universe, that even if they did not proclaim themselves to be Christians at least they held Christian values. I was raised in a community that claimed to be part of a Christian country. After all, even on our money we had the words: "In God We Trust." Later in life I discovered that it probably was the god of money that we trusted. As I was growing up I remember the Presidential Inaugurations, when Presidents would place their hands on a Bible and swear an oath of allegiance to the United States, incorporating God into those inaugural ceremonies and asking him for his blessing. During World War II, one of the more popular songs of that time talked about "coming in on a wing and a prayer." Our public officials never held back from including God in their speeches.

I attended Wood Street public school in Bristol, Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Delaware River. In the morning before school began we saluted the flag. The teacher took the Bible which always sat on his desk and read from the Psalms, and then somebody would pray. We celebrated religious holidays. At Christmas the kids worked on the nativity scene. There was peace between church and state back then; there didn't seem to be any problems between them.

But now, some 40-plus years later, though we still have the same Constitution, this peace is being challenged on every hand, resulting in great anxiety, confusion and unrest in the Christian community. Christians are struggling with how to respond to these challenges. Young people today have no idea about the Christian practices which we took for granted in those days. School prayer, nativity scenes in public places, Christian schools, tax exemptions for clergy, for Christian events, for buildings dedicated to Christian ministry, etc., presented no problem whatsoever in my younger days.

But, slowly and methodically, all that is coming to an end. A small group of liberal activists dedicated to secular humanism are challenging the government whenever they judge that the government is violating the First Amendment on the separation of church and state. This group raises a cry every time the government seeks to encourage or nurture anything that has to do with religion or Christianity. ("Religion being that which has to do with any form of worship towards any deity. That also includes Christianity as you and I know it.") U.S. News & World Report of March 4th this year in an article entitled "When Church and State Collide" quotes John Baker, the general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, as saying that he observes more battles going on today between church and state than at any previous time. The Christian Legal Society is tracking some 1,200 court cases (six times more than 10 years ago) concerning the separation of church and state.

How should a Christian react to all of this? How did you react when the school prayer amendment was voted down? How did you react to the issues that surfaced during the recent legislative debate with regard to the hiring of homosexuals? That was a social, as well as a political issue. How do you react when Christians are attacked for raising Christian issues that are mislabeled "religious issues"? How should a Christian respond to this season of testing and trial in our courts?

This legal pressure is dividing believers into different camps. We cannot agree on what our response should be. There are some Christian leaders who suggest we have three options. The first is to protest, to demonstrate and demand our rights from the government. Secondly, others say we should flee. But where do you flee to in this "land of the free and home of the brave"? There's no place to flee to. Thirdly, others suggest that Christians arm themselves and exert pressure on the state and thereby let it be known that the Christian community will not take these things lying down.

Rather than relying on one of these three options, however, I wonder if we shouldn't go to the Scripture and

see what it says, particularly the first letter of Peter, which was written to first century Christians in Asia Minor during a season of political, social and personal persecution. The question facing us this morning is this: How can Christians find peace in the midst of suffering, whether political, social, or personal suffering? How do we find and maintain that peace within our hearts? Peter will suggest to us two things: first, we should remember that we are aliens; and secondly, we should remember that we are chosen ones.

1. Realize we are aliens 1:1

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside & 5 aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia . . .

This is the same Peter, the fisherman who had been a follower of John the Baptist until his brother Andrew came to him one day and said to him, "Peter, we have found the Messiah. Come and see." When Jesus saw Peter he said to him, "Your name is Simon, son of John. You shall be called Cephas, a rock." Later, Jesus called to him by the Sea of Galilee, "Come and follow me and I will make you a fisher of men." For the next three years this energetic, impulsive, bold, self-confident and slow--tounderstand--spiritual--truth man was a follower of Jesus. Ultimately he even turned against his Lord at the trial of Jesus. The gospel of John ends with the account of Jesus in his resurrected body meeting with Peter at the Sea of Galilee and asking him if he loves him. Peter replies, "You know my heart; you know I love you." "Then," Jesus declared, "feed my sheep; tend my lambs."

Some 40 days later, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter emerges as the spokesman for the church of Jesus Christ. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we now find him a man of tremendous confidence in and understanding of the Scripture. He is even ready to lay down his life for his Master. What a difference the Holy Spirit made in his life. Thirty years later at the time he wrote this letter, Peter has become a tender, loving shepherd, walking in humility, hardly recognizable from the man in the earlier gospel accounts. Let me say to those who are concerned about their spiritual growth, to those who think they are never going to get it together, that "He who has begun a good work in you is faithful to complete it." You too will one day reflect the very character of Jesus Christ.

Peter begins his letter by describing himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ." By that he makes a distinction between himself and the many false "apostles" who were traveling around visiting the churches in that day. "Apostle," means "one who is sent forth with a message." He is not a Western Union man coming to someone's door to drop a message and wait for his tip. Peter is one whose message so changed his own life that he wants to share it with his fellow-aliens. That message is that he once walked with a Man named Jesus who came to save his people from their sins. He saw this Man perform signs and wonders so that he began to see him as the Anointed One of Israel. Peter admits he was a little slow to catch on to all that Jesus was doing, but after the resurrection he really saw that Jesus was indeed God incarnate. Following Pentecost, together with the other apostles, Peter was empowered with the Holy Spirit to fulfill Jesus' great commission to tell all the world about him, baptizing them and teaching them all the things that Christ had taught them. They were to be witnesses of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and of the life that he now enabled them to live as they submitted to him.

Before we go any further in the text we need to know when this letter was written. According to chapter 5, verse 13, Peter, together with Mark and Silvanus, was in Rome when he wrote it. Following the Jerusalem Council in 49 A.D., some New Testament scholars think he may have gone up to Turkey and ministered there for some 15 years. Then Peter had probably gone to Rome to visit Paul, who was in prison there, and also, perhaps, to encourage the church that was in Rome. There the Lord had laid on his heart the need to write this letter to the saints in Asia Minor.

Peter wrote the letter around the time of the great Neronian persecution of Christians. Because Nero had plans to build a new city, the populous of Rome had accused him of setting the fire that destroyed a great portion of the city on July 19th, 64 A.D. Nero turned their wrath on the Christians in the city by blaming them for the fire. He said that the Christians expected the world to end in flames, so they probably had started the fire. Thus began the terrible persecution of Christians in Rome. It seems likely, then, that Peter wrote this letter to warn his fellow Christians of impending persecution.

Peter is writing to Christians in churches "throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia; Asia and Bithynia," located in the north, central, and western parts of what is now Turkey. On the Day of Pentecost Peter had preached to Jews from the provinces of Pontus, Cappadocia and Asia. (The apostle Paul on his second missionary journey in 49 and 50 A.D. had developed churches in the southern part of Asia.) Remember that Peter and Paul had different missions. According to Galatians 2 and Acts 15, Peter was called to minister to the Jews, while Paul was called to the Gentiles. But both of them had ministered in this area. Despite their separate callings, however, Peter led the Gentile Cornelius to the Lord, while Paul visited the local synagogue every time he entered a new area. There is no doubt, therefore, that Peter wrote this letter to both Jews and Gentiles who were living in what is now Turkey. Because of his Jewish background, Peter writes everything with Jewish flavors and terms (terms such as "the corner stone," "the chosen people," "a royal priesthoods." etc.). After one reads the whole letter it appears that Peter is writing to Christian Jews and Gentiles. He takes statements made to Israel in the Old Testament, but, because that nation had been put aside by God, he applies these terms to the new Christian community.

Let me give you as a general overview of this letter a key verse, the theme, and then the text. From the opening verse of chapter 1 through chapter 2, verse 10 Peter talks about what it means to be "born again to a living hope"; then from chapter 2, verse 11 through chapter 4, verse 11 he talks about how "aliens" should live on this earth while they are passing through; then in chapter 4, verses 12 through 19 he talks about sharing the sufferings of Christ and how Christians participate in them; and finally in chapter 5, verses 1 through 14 he will show us how to develop a lifestyle of humility in the world.

The key verse of this book is verse 3 of chapter 1:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Peter emphasizes that no matter where we are and no matter what pressure we are facing we have a living hope which our present circumstances cannot destroy, and that hope is that Jesus Christ is risen, he now rules in our hearts and he is coming again. We are hoping for something much greater, much better and much more exciting than anything this world has to offer. We are looking forward to the coming back of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in all his glory. Jesus will not be coming back as a carpenter, not as a rabbi, an ax-convict or an ax-blasphemer, but as the Lord of Lords to whom "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

There is a theme running through this book which I like to picture in terms of a weaver sitting in front of his loom, flipping a shuttle back and forth to create a design in different colored threads. To this weaver every thread is critical, every thread plays a part in the overall design. The themes which Peter weaves into his letter are the Person and work of the Father; the life, death, resurrection and second coming of the Son; the Person and work of the Holy Spirit; and the salvation of believers. But the key threads in his design are the glorification, the living hope of believers; the suffering of believers and the glory to follow; how Christians should live in the midst of suffering; how Christ is our model; and how the world is not our home, we are just passing through. Peter's desire is that we live for the will of God, not for the will of the world.

In these opening verses Peter uses two words which every Jew would understand: the words are "alien," and "scattered." "Alien" means a pilgrim sojourning in a strange place apart from his people, with all the inconvenience that entails. Peter may have been thinking of Abraham, of whom it is said in Hebrews 11, "By faith Abraham lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents, but he was looking for a city that had foundations, whose architect and builder was God." Abraham lived in tents all his life, recognizing that he was always uncomfortable in this world, that there was something greater than his present circumstances. He was forever pulling up his tent pegs and putting them down again. Peter may have been thinking of Paul's words in Philippians 3:20: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which he also eagerly await for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul too was homesick for heaven. He recognized this world was not his home; he was passing through. He wanted to get on with real living with the resurrected Jesus Christ.

The second word, "scattered" ("diaspora," dispersion) was applied to the Jewish nation when it was set apart and scattered into foreign nations by the Babylonian and the Assyrian captivities. Here Peter applies the same word to the Christian community, saying they were scattered and dispersed by the hand of God to fulfill the commission of Acts 1:8, so that they were to be salt and light wherever they went. Looked at this way, the word "scattered" is not a bad term at all.

I could not help thinking of this word "alien" when I was at Stanford University in February with a number of our interns attending Israel Education Day. One speaker, Benjamin Netanyahu, a representative of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. addressed an auditorium packed with Jews on the subject "What Drives The Middle East Conflict?" There was tremendous anticipation in that room filled with Jews waiting to hear what this man would say. He gave a marvelous lecture, filled with great insight into that conflict. At a question and answer period following he answered questions on how many Jews were living outside of Israel, about Israel's resources and money, etc. Suddenly he said, "May I ask you a question?" I could see many of them nodding their heads in reply. He said, "In 1976, on the 200th anniversary of the United States, did you feel pride in this country?" They nodded yes. He asked them, "Did you feel patriotism?" They replied yes. Then he said, "Well let me ask you this: Did you feel pride and patriotism down to the roots of your being? No, you did not, because America is not your home, it's not your land, it's not your roots." Then like a great prophet of old he appealed to that Jewish audience, "Why don't you come home, for this is not your land?"

I'll never forget that moment. I felt within my own spirit the great Shepherd calling out to me, "Ron, you are an alien in this land. You don't belong here. Do you know why you feel uncomfortable, why you don't fit in, why you don't want to run with the Gentiles anymore, why you are not invited to their parties, why you are being ignored and snubbed? It's because you are an alien. This is not your home. You're just passing through. You're to live in a tent; don't dig in here. "

In the Philippines once I was teaching in a small village. My one friend was not there one day and I became very anxious as I didn't know the area. I felt nervous and out of place. I got back to my hotel and ran upstairs, flipped open my suitcase and pulled out my American passport. I looked at it and said, "That's my picture all right. Look at all the rights and privileges I have. I'm not a citizen of the Philippines; I'm an American citizen and I can go home. I don't have to stay here. I can get out anytime I want. " You have no idea what that reality meant to me at that moment. I knelt down and thanked God for my passport. I was an alien in that land.

What the Lord is saying to Christians is, "Check your passport. Don't get hung up in a country that's not yours. Don't become worried about all the things that are coming down." That doesn't mean you are not a good citizen, that you don't care about people. It just means there's a bigger thing going on. Don't be frightened. God is in charge. Everything is on schedule. Check your passport, is what God is telling us to do. But you've got to get a passport! And the way you get one is believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that through him you can be saved from your guilt, your sin, your shame and rebellion against God. If you will humbly bow before him and accept him as your Lord and Savior you get an eternal passport. It will never fade, rust or be eaten by moths. Check your passport.

How can we find peace in the midst of political, social and personal suffering? First, realize that you are spiritual aliens in a world that's not our home; you are just passing through.

2. Realize we are chosen 1:2

The second way we can find peace is to realize that we are "chosen" ones. Verses 1b and 2

... who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in fulfilled measure.

We are aliens on this earth, yes, but not in God's sight. Peter reminds the aliens to whom he is writing that they are chosen ones.

Verse 2 summarizes God's whole plan of salvation and the part each member of the Trinity plays in our salvation. The work of the first member of the Trinity, God the Father, on our behalf is that he is the One who has chosen us "according to his foreknowledge." Here Peter is again using a Jewish term. "chosen." This means to be picked out, to be selected. In the Old Testament we learn that Israel was chosen by God—but not because of anything they did. God called them "a stubborn, arrogant people, the smallest of all nations." They had nothing to offer but he chose them so that he could express his life, his love and his mercy through them. Through Israel would come the Redeemer of all who were under the law, but Israel rejected that plan so God turned to the Gentiles. So now instead of Israel being the channel of God's love, mercy, grace, blessing and redemption, God has formed the Body of Christ, Christian Jews and Gentiles to accomplish his will on earth in the age of the Spirit. His will is to call out a people for his namesake from among the Gentiles.

Before the foundation of the world the Godhead, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, gave thoughtful deliberation and consideration—"foreknowledge"—to a plan of redemption for mankind who would rebel against God in Adam and die in their trespasses and sins. In the midst of man's rebellion and ensuing death, God began to move. So understand that we are not aliens in God's sight. According to Ephesians 1, God thought about us before the foundation of the world, before time began.

How can we even understand such a concept? Here is a quote from a sermon on the doctrine of election by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the last century:

We go back to years gone by, when worlds were made and systems fashioned, but we have not even approached the beginning yet. Until we go to the time when all the universe slept in the mind of God as yet unborn, until we enter the eternity where God the Creator lived alone everything sleeping within him, all creation resting in his mighty gigantic thought, we have not guessed the beginning. We may go back, back, back, ages upon ages. We may go back, if we might use such strange words, whole eternities, and yet never arrive at the beginning. Our wing might be tired, our imagination would die away could it outstrip the lightnings flashing in majesty, power, and rapidity, it would soon weary itself ere it could get to the beginning. But God from the beginning chose his people; when the un navigated ether was yet unfanned by the wing of a single angel, when space was shore less, or else unborn when universal silence reigned, and not a voice or whisper shocked the solemnity of silence, when there was no being and no motion, no time, and nought but God himself, alone in his eternity; when without the song of an angel, without the attendance of even the cherubim, long ere the living creatures were born, or the wheels of the chariot of Jehovah were fashioned, even then, "in the beginning was the Word," and in the beginning God's people were one with the Word, and "in the beginning he chose them into eternal life."

That's when we were thought of! In God's sight we were never aliens. God the Father knew us by name and chose us before the beginning of time. What peace that should bring to our hearts!

God had a wonderful plan. Based on Scripture, I think it went something like this. Plan A: God the Father sends God the Son, Jesus, to earth, and presents him as the unblemished Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. All three Persons in the Godhead agreed with this plan. Plan B: God the Father selects the Jews out of fallen humanity in the age of the Spirit, a group chosen for salvation, chosen to be holy and blameless before him to the praise of his honor and glory. All three Persons in the Godhead agreed. Plan C: God the Father is to extend his love, his mercy and his life to the chosen ones, not because he saw that we would choose him, not because he saw how valuable and important we would be in his plan, not because he saw we would choose him by faith, but "God being rich in his mercy because of his great love in which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, made us alive in Christ." "By grace you have been saved," Paul wrote. Nothing on our part, nothing but the grace, the mercy and the love of God has chosen us before the beginning.

But, you say, if God foreknew us and chose us, doesn't that mean we don't have free will? No, it means we are dealing with a great mystery, a paradox of truths. I don't understand how God's sovereignty and man's free will are side and side realities, but they are. God chose me before the beginning of the world, yet I am held responsible for my choices. I don't understand how this works but I'll tell you what I did: I chose! John

3:16 is still in the Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes on him will not perish but have everlasting life. "

On this point, here is another quote from the sermon by Charles Spurgeon which I quoted from earlier:

But there are some who say, "It is hard for God to choose some and leave others." Now, I will ask you one question. Is there any of you here this morning who wishes to be holy, who wishes to be regenerate, to leave off sin and walk in holiness? "Yes, there is," says one one, "I do." Then God has elected you. But another says, "No; I don't want to be holy; I don't want to give up my lusts and my vices. " Why should you grumble, then, that God has not elected you to it? For if you were elected you would not like it, according to your own confession. If God this morning had chosen you to holiness, you say you would not care for it. Do you not acknowledge that you prefer drunkenness to sobriety, dishonesty to honesty? You love this world's pleasures better than religion; then why should you grumble that God has not chosen you to religion? If you love religion, he has chosen you to it. If you desire it, he has chosen you to it. If you do not, what right have you to say that God ought to have given you what you do not wish for?

The point is, if you feel God the Father drawing you to himself, I suggest you reach out right now, for God is starting to do a work in your heart.

Observe how God does it. Peter says that God the Father chooses us, then God the Holy Spirit sanctifies us so that we may obey Jesus. Second Thessalonians 2:13 gives us more insight into this work of the Spirit: "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth." God the Father chooses us and sets us apart, then the Holy Spirit comes and works in our hearts to give us truth, the truth that Jesus is the way and the life, the fact that Christ died on the cross for our sins to give us eternal life, that God raised him from the dead and sent him to bless us and to turn us from our wicked ways.

Further, the Holy Spirit starts to woo our hearts and our minds to repent of our sins and believe that Jesus is the only One who can save us, that "there is no other name under heaven whereby we may be saved." The Holy Spirit convinces us that we need a Savior. He offers us a choice and brings us to a place where we are willing to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. (To obey Jesus as Lord means to accept him as Lord of our lives. See Acts 6:7.) Then he gives us the power to obey the Lord and to follow his directions and his commands once we come into our salvation.

So here we have the faithful work of the Trinity in the redemption of man: God the Father chooses us, God the Holy Spirit sets us apart for obedience to faith and our walk; and then the third member of the Trinity, God the Son, cleanses us from sin and failure in our walk.

Being "sprinkled with his blood" is another Jewish term which Peter uses. He is recalling to the Jewish mind the days when they would take an unblemished lamb to the priest and with a knife cut the lamb's throat so that the blood ran in their hands. By this they were recognizing that were it not for the love and the mercy of God their own blood, not the lamb's blood, would have to flow. The priest would then sprinkle the lamb's blood on the altar to cleanse the sins, the shame and the guilt of the people. When John the Baptist recognized who Jesus was he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin." And the blood of Jesus Christ keeps cleansing us from our sins. John the apostle tells us in his letter, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We of all men and women are most blessed. I was standing by St. Stephen's Gate in Jerusalem once when a Jewish man walked by with a girl on his arm, both half drugged. We had a conversation about the Temple that once stood there. I asked him, "As a Jew, what do you do with your sin, your guilt and your shame now?" He said, "I have devised a psychological method whereby I can suppress it. I can put it out of my mind." "What do you do when it keeps popping back up?" I asked him. He said, "Tourist, I've got to go now." Christians don't ever have to worry about their sins popping back up, for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all

sin.

No wonder Peter can say to his readers at the end of verse 2, "May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure." So that they may have that grace and peace they need to realize that they are aliens in a foreign land; that they have been chosen by the Father, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and cleansed by the Son.

As in the day when Peter wrote this letter, it appears that the church of Jesus Christ is entering a whole new season of testing, politically, socially, and personally. Yet the words Jesus said to his disciples on the night he was betrayed, arrested, beaten, tried and sentenced to death_a night when he as an innocent man suffered personal and political persecution_are as relevant today to any true disciple as they were on that night: "My 'shalom' I give you, my 'shalom' I leave with you, not as the world gives do I give it to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. "

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1 Peter 1: 1-2
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