

Triumphalism, Not Escapism

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2 Peter 1:16-21

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." 18And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Have you honestly examined the content of your prayers, the requests you make of your God? And if you did what would you find? Prayers for comfort, health, prosperity would no doubt lead the list of petitions. We, naturally, pray with much intensity that our Father would relieve our suffering. And there is nothing wrong with this; it is very Scriptural to do so. We are to bring everything to Him in prayer and petition. There is nothing wrong with praying for God to alleviate problems or difficulties in your life. However, how many of our prayers for protection and blessings would not be loving for God to grant. What if God loved you too much to give you some of things for which you ask? No doubt, God loves us too much to answer many of our prayers and for this we ought to be most grateful. Many times, our own self-preservation and protection and comfort is the only concern we have when we offer up our petitions to God and God, in His loving mercy and kindness, refuses to answer those because He loves you too much.

How would you pray if you were suffering persecution? Would you see it as a problem to flee or an opportunity? Here Peter is writing to several congregations that were undergoing great suffering, great difficulty as they were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. He spends the first epistle establishing why that was happening to them and how they were to appropriately respond. He says many things in that first epistle about persecution. We don't have time to highlight every one of them but I want to mention one.

These believers had experienced a long duration of persecution. Some of them were wondering if God had abandoned them and it's not surprising that you would think so when you undergo difficulty for a long period of time. Waiting on God is not an easy thing and sometimes, as the Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." The longer you have to wait the longer your heart becomes agitated if not groaning, and faith begins to wane and lessen.

“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. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. ¹⁷ For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ Now “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.” (1 Peter 4:12-19)

The Apostle Peter speaking to beleaguered, suffering Christians says, “Listen, it’s not strange that you’re being persecuted. No, you’re being persecuted because you are counter-cultural. It’s to be expected. Not only that, you are blessed. It’s not because God has abandoned you, it’s the very evidence that you are one of His own people. By this God is being glorified because judgment begins at the house of God.” What does that mean? It simply means that God cleanses His own people. He sanctifies us and one of the tools He uses is suffering—personal sanctification, which we’ll look at in a few minutes—but also there are many people in the church who profess Jesus Christ when times are prosperous, when it is expedient for personal reasons to claim the name *Christian*. When the church advances, many will come into it thinking they will gain some of the prosperity and blessings. But when judgment comes, that is when persecution comes, ah, then there is a dividing line cast and God separates the chaff from the wheat and those who are truly His will be revealed and those who aren’t will be exposed. That’s what Peter is saying.

Then he spends the second epistle wanting to again encourage these dear saints before he dies. He’s about to be martyred and he will die, history tells us, on a cross. As they laid him down on the cross and he said, “No, no, no. Turn me upside down, for I am not worthy to be crucified as my Lord.” So history tells us that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome. But preceding the execution he writes this letter wanting to one more time encourage these besieged Christians. How does he do so? Throughout the second epistle, the predominant theme is the return of Christ—Jesus is coming back! And when He returns we will triumph over all our enemies and every foe will be vanquished and we will be shown as victors with Christ. Listen to what he says in our text once again in verse 16,

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

He’s not talking about Jesus’ first coming but His second coming. All through the epistle he addresses the return of Jesus Christ. This is one of the hopes of Christians today—Christ is going to return. Yet, often we do not think about the return of Christ until suffering. Then we think of the return of Christ as a means of getting us out of the problem. I think one of the incorrect doctrines concerning the end times is the pretribulational rapture. It’s a modern doctrine, 1830

was when it was first taught and I think one of the reasons it has generated so much interest and popularity is because it fosters an escapist mentality. A mentality of escapism yells, “Get us out of the problems!” So Peter addresses this.

I. Persecution and Problems Tempt Us To Adopt Escapism

A. Belief in the Return of Christ Can Be An Escape Mechanism.

This philosophy can become a way of life. You look for the coming of Jesus simply because you don't want to suffer anymore. Nobody in his or her right mind wants to suffer, don't misunderstand me. But the doctrine, the teaching, the promise of Jesus' return is not just for our escape out of problems, it is to have a sanctifying, motivating, persevering work for right now. It's to do something for us and in us right now, not just get us out of our problems.

Do you have an escapist mentality when it comes to the return of the Lord? It's very easy to know if you do or not. When you're in trouble and life seems very hard, don't you start thinking about the return of Christ? How many of you have said, “I'll be glad when Jesus comes back. I won't have to put up with this anymore”? We've all said that.

But what about when things are going quite well, when you're prospering and there are no challenges or problems? Do you think about the Lord's return then? Probably not so much. And if you do, it's probably, *Lord, You don't need to come back right now.* You would prolong the return. That's because we've developed an escapist mentality about the return of Jesus Christ.

There's another way that manifests itself, not just in longing for Him to return when we have problems.

B. Compromise of Christian Doctrine and Ethic Can Be An Escape Mechanism.

This is what you and I are now confronted with in our society like never before. To advert, to avoid persecution, some will compromise the truth of God and abandon Christian ethics. This is happening and you're going to see more of it. Christian organizations, Christian business owners, even churches, will come to the conclusion that their position on a Christian ethic concerning sexuality is not worth the suffering and the cost that they'll have to pay and so they'll say something like this, “This is a complete distraction. Christianity is more than about sexual identity and all that goes with that. Let's just stay with the main business, the Gospel and doing good. Let's not get bogged down in social issues.” They'll compromise in order to escape the persecution that will come with any believer who stands with the Word of God concerning Christian ethics. That is an escape mechanism and Peter recognizes that this is a potential problem, even for those whom he is writing.

C. Persecution and Problems Are Strategic Opportunities For Gospel Advancement.

Your persecution, your suffering, you being maligned and ridiculed for being a Christian is actually a God-served opportunity handed over to you to see the Gospel advanced. I told you the story of the recent Isis convert. He came to know Jesus. This happened within the last few months. With his rifle aimed at the chest of a Christian, he was about ready to execute him as he had done many others, the Christian said, "One moment please. Would you permit me to give you a gift?" And he gave the man his Bible. The man took the Bible then pulled the trigger and killed him. He took the Bible home with him and began to read it. Strangely, a reoccurring dream began of a man in white approaching him saying, "You're killing My people." Night after night it was the same dream. As he continued to read the Bible he discovered this man was Jesus. This was the Jesus of the Bible appearing to him in his dream! And he gave his heart to the Lord Jesus Christ and is right now being discipled to preach the Gospel to others.

Here was the life of one man, we don't even know his name, who used his suffering and even his martyrdom for the glory of God. He saw it as an opportunity and so should we, for Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15 that persecution and suffering is an opportunity for betterment for suffering.

"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.¹⁷ For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit." (1 Peter 3:15-18)

Peter says it's better if in the will of God we suffer whether it be through persecution or just life's difficulties so people see that we joyfully and cheerfully embrace our suffering. Doctors will baffle at the peace of God that sustains you and they will wonder how it's possible that you could go through illness in such a calm and deliberate attitude. The answer is that it's an opportunity for the Gospel! It's Christ in us! When you suffer and sinners see how you endure it, embracing it cheerfully, and they say, "How can you do this?" Be ready to give an answer. They might still call you an evildoer—this where we are right now as you'll see in a few moments—because all those who will maintain a moral, biblical, ethical position will be considered evil and a menace to society, but if they watch you suffer joyfully, embracing it as Christ embraced His sufferings, they will be ashamed. That's what Peter says in verse 16. Then he gives us an example of Jesus Himself. What better illustration to demonstrate betterment than the death of Christ? Out of His death we've been saved. Out of His flowing side we have been given life. That is betterment from suffering. This is our example.

Not only that it has a sanctifying effect. Persecution and suffering sanctifies.

"Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,² that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God." (1 Peter 4:1-2)

That doesn't mean that he or she who suffers for Jesus becomes perfect and never sins again, but it does mean that their persecution, their suffering for Jesus, has a sanctifying effect that even pet sins they've coddled become perverse and disgusting. There is something about taking your life and submitting it to Christ and receiving a persecuting abuse, which changes your attitude about temptation.

Lastly, it glorifies God. This is how the Gospel is advanced.

"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 4:14)

God is glorified. He is seen in our suffering.

Why does God allow Christians to undergo this suffering of persecution? The question is kind of silly if you stop and think about it in a historical context

II. Historic Christianity Is Both Strange and Scandalous to Culture

True Christianity is always strange to the culture. True Christianity always carries a stigma and is a scandal.

A. The Gospel Has Always Been Strange and Scandalous to the Culture.

"For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷ For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."¹⁸ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain." (2 Peter 1:16-18)

"And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:19-21)

The Old and New Testaments have always sounded strange and it's always been scandalous to the culture. From its very inception the truth of Christ has been mocked, denied, and rejected. When Mary told Joseph that she was with child but that he need not worry she was still a virgin, Joseph did not break out singing "Away in a Manger." His response was to put her away privately because he knew enough of biology to know how women get pregnant, so he planned how he could end their engagement without making it a public scandal. God had to reveal it to him by sending an angel in a dream. The Gospel is always a scandal!

Listen to our Lord preaching. At one point in his early ministry, crowds followed Him, perhaps as many as 10,000 to 12,000. They loved His teaching, but they really loved His miracles. John 6 is

one of those occasions, the crowds wanted to crown Him king. Rather than for His mission to be compromised and His doctrine misunderstood, Jesus did what He always did at moments like these, He stopped them and clarified what He was teaching at the cost of His popularity. Did you hear that? He always said something that clarified what He was trying to say in such a way that He often lost His popularity. He said to the massive crowd, “You must eat my flesh and drink my blood if you’re to have eternal life.” And the Bible says His crowd of disciples said, “This is way too much for us” and turned and followed Him no more.

Jesus was standing before thousands but now there was only twelve. He asked if they were going to leave Him also. The Gospel in its true essence will never be popular in any culture.

When Jesus arose from the dead and was first seen by Mary, she reported to the apostles that Jesus was alive, did they believe it? No, they mocked her. They didn’t believe. Even His own apostles thought the announcement of His resurrection was too strange to believe.

When you move to the book of Acts and listen to the message of the greatest preachers of all time, you find out they don’t sound out PC (politically correct) sermons. They were not privy to the information on *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. They said things like, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

When Paul entered Gentile cities, he always went first to the Jewish synagogue and then to the Gentiles. But his message was always countercultural to both groups. He says in I Corinthians 1:23, “but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.”

The message that we have, the message that we’ve been entrusted with will not gain us social acceptability. You say it has. *For years the Gospel has been socially acceptable.* A form of Christianity, a deformed Christianity, a hollowed out Christianity has been somewhat acceptable, but not true Christianity.

I remember in my lifetime—and I’m not that old—people joining churches because it would advance them financially, socially, and politically. It was popular and the norm to be a “Christian,” and if you were an atheist or an agnostic you were the abnormal and the unpopular and you could not socially rise most often, nor could you rise in politics or business being a pronounced atheist. But now that’s reversed. Judgment has come to the house of God now. God has put us in a place where we either have to be true to the Bible or we compromise and have an escapist mentality. Those who remain faithful to the message of the Gospel will remain strange to the culture and scandalous.

We are living at a time when the Kingdom of God is not yet manifest. Do not think it strange the fiery trial that has settled upon you. We therefore are called upon to speak prophetically—Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming! And when He returns in the clouds He will come with judgment in His hands. Today is the day of salvation! Why? Because there is coming an hour of reckoning when

the King will appear and when He appears He will come with a sword in His mouth, dividing the sheep from the goats. This is a prophetic message and therefore it is a strange sound in the ears of unbelieving culture. For years the definition of a Christian was “a good person.” The definition was not biblical or theologically driven. The only theology that was necessary was that you believed there was a God and that Jesus was His Son and that He was born around Christmas time and died and rose again at Easter time. If you believed that and were reasonably good, then according to the American definition of Christianity you were a Christian. That means you could identify with Christianity and not truly be a Christian, a person who had a real living changing relationship with Jesus Christ that changed their lives and lived by the principles of the Kingdom of God.

But that has changed. Now the words *good* and *Christian* have been redefined. Good is now defined as tolerant, relevant, and inclusive and Christian is defined as narrow, bigoted, and exclusive. A Christian is seen as someone who is strange to the mainstream culture, which is what it meant to the mainstream culture in the first three centuries of the church. It was counter-cultural then and it is counter-cultural now. What we are now seeing is not new to Christianity. Christianity, if it is lived out according to its biblical definition, will always carry with it scandal and derision and shame and reproach.

So here we are. What is our hope?

III. The Return of Christ is the Hope of Final Triumph

A. Persecution and Problems Can Discourage Faith.

Peter knows this so before he dies, he will remind his audience one more time of their hope—Christ is going to return. Recently, many in the church have watched the advance of secularism and sin in society and their faith has been discouraged. They wonder what we’ve done wrong, where is God, why has this happened? American was a Christian nation, they say, America was a nation founded upon the Bible, what has happened? Have our techniques and methods failed? Have we taken a wrong turn? What’s going on? Friends, the Gospel is strange. What we are seeing is God purifying the message. Therefore do not be discouraged. Don’t let your faith be down-trodden. You have not missed it.

In light of Wednesday night’s discussion, some of us came to the conclusion that the church has failed in America. In some sense that is true but the more I’ve looked at Peter’s writings the last couple of three days, I have come to the conclusion that we haven’t. Not God’s people. Not the true believer. Not the true Christian. Not the church that has maintained the Gospel, we have not failed, we’ve simply found ourselves in a different atmosphere and environment where it is no longer popular or the norm to believe the Bible. Don’t be discouraged, church.

B. The Promise of Christ’s Return is God’s Promise of Final Victory Over Sin.

The battle rages now and sometimes looks doubtful of final triumph. We see what's happening in our own culture, in this great nation of ours and we think we've lost it and that there's no hope. We begin to want to recluse and hide ourselves in these holy huddles—no! This is the moment God has given us a stage, a platform to shine. If ever the society and culture in which we live needs the Gospel it's today. We need brave men and women to stand at any cost and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and demonstrate the enduring, persevering severity and suffering.

You can look at the world's condition and wonder if there is any hope for mankind. Not in man there isn't, but in Christ? Yes. It's in His return. No man, no government, no political party, no organization will ever bring the peace this world needs but Jesus Christ. That's our hope. Peter says, "I didn't give you some cunningly devised fables, it's true—He came the first time and He's coming a second time." There were those who had actually crept into the church and began to teach and say, "Ah, Jesus isn't going to come back. It's been nearly 40 years since He left. If He was going to come back He would have come before now." Peter, in the second chapter of his second epistle, says no, don't consider God in His waiting as being slack concerning His promises for one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day to the Lord. He's going to return! Some were saying, "Well, Jesus said it would get worse and it would be very difficult before He returns, but it's been worse for 40 years. We've been under great tribulation. Surely then we have a false hope." Peter was reply that they didn't have a false hope. Jesus is going to return.

The promise is not salvation of the present evil age but deliverance out of it. The Bible does not promise any Christian or His church that this present world will be saved. It will not be. The Bible is clear, things will wax worse and worse and because of it the love of many shall grow cold. Jesus did not come to save this world, He came to save His people out of it.

"who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father," (Galatians 1:4)

"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (John 15:19)

Leonard Ravenhill used to say he was always amazed that God's grace could take a wicked, worldly sinner out of the world, save him, sanctify him, and then put him back into the world and keep him saved. That's what salvation is. It's not a reconstruction of our society, our government, or our culture. This present evil age is dominated by a ruler, "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." The Gospel will not change America but what God will do through His Gospel is pluck out as brands in the fire those whom He will save and He will bring them into the fold. There are sheep yet to be brought into the fold and therefore we must not be silent.

C. We Must Continue to Preach This Strange Gospel.

Our message is still the same—the Gospel that is scandalous and strange—a Man died two thousand years ago as a criminal, but He rose again on the third day by the power of God. That's our message. *We'll be laughed at if we tell that message.* Yes, we will, but God will use it to save some. Why? Because the Gospel has not changed—it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

The message is He's coming back again. We do not compromise. If ever we need to be more vocal, this is the hour that we have been given to take the Gospel to the world. A world that will shun and reject it. A world that will ignore it and if they can't ignore it they will try to silence it. But this is the mission we've been given. Let us not shrink back from fear or horror, from pain or suffering or unease. Let us remember Jesus.

“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?¹³ Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:11-13)

We are to be like the old saints who declared they were foreigners, strangers passing through this world. They desired a better—that is heavenly—country, therefore God was not ashamed to be called their God for He was preparing a city for them. That's our hope.

Listen, if the book of Revelation tells me anything it's that under God's worst judgment on mankind, people will still not repent. If they will not repent when the judgments of God are being poured out on this world like it has never seen before, why do you think they are going to come running to you and me when we say that Jesus can forgive them of their sins? They're not. No one is ever saved apart from the supernatural drawing power of the Spirit. It is a miracle! Why do we forget this? If we will just speak the Gospel we will then give the Spirit of God the opportunity to take the Word and do His miraculous thing.

How do we maneuver in a different climate than we're used to? The same way we did before. Nothing has changed. We're still His people, He's still our God, and the Gospel is the same. But there will come hours and days when you'll be overcome or tempted at least to doubt. Discouragement will be so pressing upon your heart that your faith may tremble. It's coming. I pray you will not falter in that hour but you will remain. God knows what He's doing. The Gospel was born out of weakness; it sprang out of the womb of weakness. God in death triumphed over His enemies. He didn't come as a conquering King on a white horse; He came as a little baby. He lived in obscurity and for the last three and a half years of His life He preached the Gospel that was strange and scandalous to most of His hearers. They wanted to silence Him and they did—they nailed Him to a cross and He died. Out of weakness, out of death, has come this Gospel we live by and hope in.

The Apostle Paul said God doesn't call the strong; He calls the weak to confound the mighty. Weakness has always been God's choice method of declaring His glory through human vessels— He's not going to change now. I don't have all the answers. I'm not the most clever apologist that can give a sound defense of the Gospel that can answer every question, but I do have God and I have His Spirit and I have the Gospel and that is enough to convert the heart when God is involved.

One day He is coming back but not as a baby. This time He will come as a conquering King on a white horse. Before He comes He will baptize His people in suffering. I want to encourage you by saying to you,

When friends betray us,
When darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart
That this is not,
This is not our home.
It's not our home.

'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?

What if my greatest disappointments or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy?
What if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are your mercies in disguise?

There's no doubt about it. As we suffer for Him, He will be glorified and we will be glorified with Him. Let this doctrine not create an escapist mentality but a resolve to persevere no matter the difficulty, and to take our suffering as an opportunity to declare Christ crucified, resurrected, and coming again. May God help us to do that. Amen.