

### Peter and the Pandemic

Turn to 1 Peter 1 please. We first started hearing about covid 19 around a year ago. This pandemic has swelled, and had a much bigger effect on our lives than we thought a year ago, or even than I thought 6 months ago. And this should remind us that much of the New Testament was written in direct response to hardships of one kind or another.

Ethnic and racial tensions give us Galatians, and Philippians, 1 Corinthians and Romans. Poverty and injustice in the church give us James and 1 Corinthians. Insults and social scorn give us Thessalonians and Hebrews and Revelation. And, 1 Peter as well. Insults and generally being unwanted in society brought us 1 Peter.

So Peter wrote a letter to guide believers, to help them understand what was happening to them, and to guide their response. How should followers of Christ understand hardship, and how should they respond? We're going to tour 1 Peter on what is actually happening from God's side, and how we should understand and respond to hardship.

Joshua Coutts teaches NT at the seminary, now that I am mostly retired. He sent me an essay on Peter and the pandemic, for me to read over and make suggestions. And I thought, "this is very good, and God wants me to preach this." So the core ideas here come from Joshua Coutts, and I have his permission to bring this to you. Let's read 1 Peter 1:3-9

*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 Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for 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. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

### **The Hardship Furnace**

Gold refined by fire. If you have a lump metal, and it looks like gold, but you're not sure if it's really gold, you put it in a furnace and heat it up. The gold melts and sinks to the bottom, and the dross burns away or at least rises so you can get rid of it. The fire does two things: one, it proves that there's real gold in there. The furnace does not create gold, the gold was already there, but the furnace proves that it was real gold. Two, the furnace separates the gold from the garbage.

Each one of us individually is being refined by fire, and churches are being refined by fire. That's what's happening, that's how trouble and distress looks to God. The hardship furnace.

### **Hardship Salvation**

Did you catch how Peter described salvation? We were born again, by God's great mercy, into *hope*, a living *hope*. We were converted into *hope*. We were also born again into an *inheritance*, an incredible inheritance that has no shelf life, never getting old. It is kept in heaven for us.

And we are kept for it, because we trust God, we are guarded by God's own power, to make sure we are kept. Kept for what? Did you catch what we're kept for? *The coming of our salvation*. We have received God's mercy, yes, we are born again, yes, we have an inheritance, yes, we have faith, yes. But not salvation. No, that's coming when Christ is revealed.

The NT often speaks like this. We read it, and it is like water off a duck's back. You and I just want things to go back to normal. Peter hopes the pandemic will wake us up to how short-sighted we are, and how small our imaginations are. As long as we just want normal, folks, the hardship fire is having no effect. Peter pulls us to the future, to our hope, to meeting the Lord.

There is so much of this in the NT. Before we go any farther here, we need to admit, to ourselves and to God, that we have not really grabbed this. We want blessings now. But Peter tells us that hardship salvation has not happened, it comes with Christ.

### **Hardship Variety**

Peter says we rejoice in our hope and salvation even though we suffer grief in all kinds of trials. Take the "grief" seriously, the word means emotional distress, sorrow, loss, anguish of the soul. *In all kinds of trials*. The fire that refines the gold of our faith comes in endless variety. James the Lord's brother begins his letter with the same words, "*all kinds of trials*."

There are many griefs and tests besides this pandemic. For some reason, we tend to think our own grief does not count. Either because it is not persecution, or because it is our own fault, or because if we were stronger it would go away, or some kind of bad reason like that.

If you trust the Lord, and you have a painful hardship of some kind, Peter is talking to you. All kinds of hardships, with all kinds of causes, are all fire to prove the gold in us.

### **Hardship Praise**

Peter shows us how to praise and worship in our trials. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who rebirthed us to a living hope. ... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you have all kinds of grief. These will result in praise, glory and honour, when Jesus Christ is revealed. You believe in him, and are filled with joy.*

If we want to make Christian hope our own, if we want actually to grab hold of it, and sink our teeth into it, not just pretend but live it, we will do that by praising and thanking God. That's what Peter wants them to do. He knows very well that they are surprised by their troubles, and in distress, and he's telling them how to praise God. We adapt our worship.

“God, you are worthy of praise for rebirthing us into a living hope. The great inheritance you keep ready for us gives us reason for joy. O God, we worship you, you shield and guard us now, you keep us for that happy day. O Lord, the great salvation that's approaching us encourages us right now. O Lord, I am going to stick with you in this hardship, this refining fire. Keeping faith will bring me glory and honour when you are revealed on earth. Amen.”

Folks, this is not a positive thinking trick. This is God telling us how to take hope for ourselves. Those people were no happier than we are, they were as miserable as the best of us. They were in surprised and in distress. So Peter tells them how to praise God, and what to celebrate.

We are not taking our God-given hope into our own minds until we are actually thanking and praising God for the future he guaranteed us. We make it ours in our worship and thanksgiving. That's hardship praise.

### **Reflection**

Let's take a look at ourselves. When I suffer distress in any trials, I pray for relief. We express our faith by asking God for relief. We would like Peter to tell us how to pray for relief so that God will predictably answer our prayers. When I say “we,” I mean “I.” That's how I pray. When we thank God, we thank God for relief from trials.

That's not how Peter talks about these things, is it. He does not talk about relief in this present time. He does not hold out hope for that. At the end of 1 Peter, after all the rest of his letter, he says, “Throw all your cares on God, because he cares for you.” Even that does not promise relief, but it still ends up being our favorite verse in Peter.

Peter thinks we should thank God for hope, for Jesus who's alive and coming back. We should thank God for the indescribable inheritance that's kept for us, and that God is keeping us for it. Peter thinks we should thank God that there's a great salvation on the way for us, which we'll receive when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The hardship and trouble that refines us is designed to take us in this direction. And it does do this, but it takes quite a bit of refining fire, doesn't it. We have a little ways to go yet.

### **Hardship Minds – 1:13**

*Therefore, with minds that are alert and clear-thinking, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.*

And again: *Therefore, with minds that are alert and clear-thinking, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.* Let's just say it: we don't want to wait that long. Surely not, Lord. "O God, we don't want to wait that long. We don't want to wait for the grace that's coming to us when Jesus Christ comes. We want that, too, but we want relief before that, please, Lord."

What if we want rescue from our trouble that causes us pain, but God has a different rescue in mind. What if God wants to rescue us from this very kind of small thinking, and small praise, and small hope? What if God wants us to have big imagination, and eternal thinking? What if he want us to praise him for the huge blessings, and the eternal living hope?

What if, once we're rescued, we'll have minds that firmly hope on the grace that'll be brought to us when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming? What if we should pray for that? I think that's what Peter is after here. Hardship minds set their hope on the coming grace.

### **Hardship Submission – 2:13-17**

*Submit yourselves, for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will, that by doing good, you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.*

Peter warns us about our relationship to human authorities. Folks, this is not complicated. *Submit yourselves, for the Lord's sake, to every human authority.*

Since our Lord and Champion is in heaven now, and our citizenship is in heaven, Peter feared that we would take this the wrong way. Peter here sounds just like Paul. Submission to human authorities was a real issue in the first century, and it is among Christians now in this pandemic.

If Jesus is Lord, we submit to every human authority. The authorities in Peter's day were no friendly to Christians than they are in our day, I can assure you. It is God's will that we would be model citizens of our human authorities. Authorities suspect us, just because we are Christians, then as now. We will silence their suspicions by being the best citizens they have.

We do this for the Lord's sake. This God's will. This is how we live as God's slaves. Peter uses strong language because Christians have a long history of being obnoxious citizens. We are model citizens purely out of loyalty to our Lord, as God's slaves. Hardship submission.

**The Hardship Call – 2:21-23**

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

My brothers and sisters, Christ suffered, and we will suffer. It is going to happen. Christ suffered *for us* so we could have forgiveness of sins, but that is not the only reason he suffered *for us*. He also suffered *for us* to leave us an example of how to act when we suffer. When we became Christians, God called us to follow Christ’s example of how to suffer.

Christ’s example has to do with his speech, the things he will not say. *No deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

Jesus suffered severely, it was completely unfair, at the hands of evil people. Nothing unpleasant came out of his mouth toward them. Paul says, “do everything without grumbling and complaining.” This is the example Christ left us. Instead of criticizing and abusing the hostile authorities, Christ put himself in God’s hands.

What if God wants us holy, more than he wants us happy? We pursue our happiness, and God pursues our holiness. Christ suffered to leave us an example, and God calls us to follow it.

**No Hardship Surprise – 4:12-13**

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Don’t be surprised that you have all kinds of tests and troubles. Don’t be surprised that the gold in you is being put to the fire to be proved, and purified. Don’t think that this is a strange event.

Even Jesus, says Hebrews, learned obedience from his troubles and distress. Rejoice that God is treating you just like he treated his Son, whom he loves. Rejoice now, so you will be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. Don’t be surprised, and don’t think it strange. God is honouring you, he is doing the same with you as he did with Christ. No hardship surprise, please, says Peter.

**Hardship Faith – 4:17,19**

*It is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?... So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*

It is time for judgement to begin with God's household. God has a schedule. First he cleans and purifies his own household, then he cleans and purifies the rest of the world. This present age, in Peter's time and ours, is household clean up. And if it's severe for us, says Peter, what will it be like for those who disobey the gospel?

Peter says our trials are like gold being put to the fire, to prove it's gold, and refine it. In 2 Peter 3 Peter talks about the fire God will use to clean up the world that disobeys the gospel, when he judges the world. 2 Peter 3. That's wrath-of-God fire. Refining fire is love-of-God fire.

We respond just like Jesus did. We respond with hardship faith. Jesus entrusted himself to his faithful Father, and continued to do good. So we who follow in his footsteps will commit ourselves to our faithful Creator and continue to do good. We put ourselves in God's hands, and live in his ways, one more day. That is the right faith in hard times. That's hardship faith.

### **Hardship Humility – 5:6-7**

*So then, humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you.*

Peter's churches were being scorned and excluded from the society around them, maybe worse. God is not the one who stirs up trouble like that. And yet, my brothers and sisters, get this, even though God did not stir up the trouble they were in, the apostle Peter says, "*So then humble yourselves under God's mighty hand.*"

Our troubles are like Paul's thorn. It was a messenger of Satan, Paul said. He asked the Lord to take it away. "No, Paul," said the Lord, "that thorn is staying. You are better for my kingdom if it stays, you're more effective in my kingdom if it stays. My care and my help will keep you going." So Paul humbled himself under the Lord's mighty hand.

I am entirely selfish. I pray that my will may be done, and I try to convince God that it must be his will to do my will. But the God who loves me wants my holiness more than my happiness. I want to be rescued from my distress and trouble. God wants to rescue me from that.

God wants to rescue me from my lack of faith, and my lack of humility, which means my lack of holiness. He allows the trouble, he wants me to put my whole life in the hands of my faithful Creator, and keep doing good. My ongoing trouble is his mighty hand. He wants me to humble myself under his mighty hand.

And he cares about me, and you. He cares about us. We cast ourselves upon him, and that includes our cares, we throw our cares on him, because he cares about us. He's compassionate, and will send comfort and strength. Remember the Luke 11 sermon. God never does nothing. Don't tie his generosity to rescue, to the trouble going away. Let's humble ourselves before him.

## **Hardship Freedom**

Peter's teaching gets rid of some painful accusations that we live with. We think we are suffering because we don't have enough faith. No, we are suffering because God is treating us like his Son. Even Jesus learned obedience from his trouble and distress.

We think we're suffering because we don't know the right prayer for deliverance. No, we're suffering because God is refining our gold, the most precious thing he has is our gold. We think we're suffering because God doesn't love us, because he ignores our prayers. No, we're suffering because he's treating us like he treated his Son.

We think we're in trouble because there's sin in our lives. Of course there's sin in our lives, but Jesus himself had to learn obedience from his suffering. We think we have hardship because other people did bad things to us. They probably did, but that happened to Jesus too. We have hardship because God is refining our gold.

We think we have distress because we're not strong enough to pull ourselves out of this, we somehow can't put this behind us – no, we have distress because God is treating us like his Son. We think we're suffering because our genetics, our DNA, say this will happen to us. We think we suffer because we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wrong. We belong to God, and those don't work. We suffer because a Father who loves us is doing his great work.

We think we have trouble because we made a bad choice, and we're paying the price. Well, we all make bad choices, and some people make terrible choices and get away with it. God is not a victim to any of these things, and that means we are not victims of any of these things either. Be encouraged, and imitate Jesus. He put his whole self in the hands of a faithful and just Creator, and he did the right thing one more day. This world is not our home. Amen.

**PRAYER:** Father, by your Spirit we are born again into hope. We are born again into an inheritance we cannot imagine. You are keeping it for us, and you are keeping us for it. And we do love Jesus, whom we have not seen, who we do not see now. But we will see him. We want to set our minds firmly on the coming grace.

O God, I am so bad at this. I don't want to hope, I want to feel better. Why can't you make me holy and happy at the same time? Help us trust that you have not left us. Thank you that you care about us, and are concerned for us. We want to humble ourselves before you, and live like Jesus did. We want to humble ourselves before you, and live like Jesus did. We need a lot of help. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.