1 Peter 1:1-12

Key Verses 6-7

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 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.

I earnestly pray that through our reading and study this Easter Sunday, we may greatly rejoice together with all of God’s elect in remembrance of who our Lord and Savior is, and what Christ Jesus has done and will do for us.

1. God’s elect

It is the opinion of the early Church Fathers that Peter wrote this letter to the believers who were in what is now modern Turkey while he himself was in Rome (to which he referred as Babylon in 5:13). Peter describes these believers as “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia…” Peter was writing primarily to the Jewish believers who had been exiled and scattered after the severe persecutions carried out by Herod and the Jewish religious authorities after the stoning of Stephen and the execution of James, brother of John.

Imagine what a turn of events these exiles had experienced! In the early days of their faith it must have felt like they were already living in heaven. They had simply believed the message of forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus’ death and resurrection. They joined a community of believers where no one claimed any property as his own. They shared everything together, and their number was growing day by day. They witnessed many miracles, and they were shepherded by the very men and women who had walked in Jesus’ presence and had witnessed his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. They heard bible messages daily from those who had been filled with the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost. But their dreamlike life of Christian koinonia was shattered because of the jealousy and evil desires of the religious leaders and of King Herod’s heirs. They were denounced as blasphemers. They were arrested and tortured so that they might deny Jesus as Lord and Christ. And so, like the poor Ukrainian people of today, they were forced to flee their homeland and beautiful fellowship, seeking out a new life among the Jewish diaspora and Gentile converts in Asia Minor. They left behind a trail of tears. And in their new homes, they were a minority and surrounded by all kinds of strange and foreign practices, including Emperor Worship and the superstitions of the Greeks and Romans.

It sounds like a tragic story. Peter, however, addresses them first of all as “God’s elect,” and elaborates, saying “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled by his blood;…” Peter didn’t deny their suffering as exiles. But as Paul declared in Romans 8:18, Peter did not consider their present suffering worth comparing to the value of their election and sanctification by the power of Jesus’ blood establishing them as God’s covenant people.

These days, the name Christian is often confused with race, nationality, political party, or tribe. Peter, however, was clear that to be a Christian was to be one of the elect, chosen and sanctified by God. Jesus told his disciples in John 15:16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.“ In the beginning, Peter and the others had a deep conviction that Jesus had chosen them because of their special characteristics, such as John’s fiery temper or Peter’s passionate loyalty. Even Nathanael considered that he should be in line to be at Jesus’ right or left hand in his kingdom. But Jesus himself had no illusions about his disciples, declaring that they would all fall away, and that the most loyal Peter would deny him three times on the night of his arrest. It was true. They all failed Jesus. Judas betrayed him. But the Risen Jesus appeared to the Eleven when they were hiding in Jerusalem and even to disciples running away to Emmaus. He broke bread with them and breathed on them the Holy Spirit. According to John, he gave a special grace to Peter, affirming that Peter was chosen by God to feed Jesus’ sheep, though it meant that “when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”” (John 21:18-19).

Still, Peter was tempted many times to take pride in his status as a Jew and chosen follower of Jesus, only to be reminded that God’s choosing is God’s purview. On one such occasion, Peter was praying up on the roof of a friend in Joppa, when he had a vision instructing him not to call unclean what God had declared clean. At that moment, representatives from a Roman centurion named Cornelius came and asked Peter to come with them to Caesarea to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household. Peter obeyed his vision and went, but when he arrived at Cornelius’ household, he explained how difficult it was for him to do so. He said in Acts 10:27-29, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.” As Peter preached to them, the Holy Spirit came and baptized Cornelius and his family and friends. Peter confessed in Acts 10:47, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” And he explained to his skeptical Jewish brothers, (Acts 11:17) “So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

We must be humbled by Peter’s struggle to understand and accept God’s election. Each of us has so many talents and unique qualities that easily convince us it is because of them that God chose us and not someone else. We are also inclined to exclude others from God’s election if we don’t agree with them. We forget Jesus’ words of warning to the Pharisees, “And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” (Luke 3:8). God’s choosing removes all credit from us. But as Peter reminds the readers of his letter, God’s choosing also means that our election cannot be taken from us, no matter the circumstance. Many Christians of Peter’s time were exiled, broken-hearted and wandering. But they remained God’s elect, chosen by God the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, sprinkled by the blood of Christ and so united with him in a new covenant relationship, forever. God’s election sets us free from all worldly powers, enabling us beyond all reason to be obedient to Jesus Christ and his law of love, and so dwell in his grace and peace in every circumstance. As Peter declared, no one and nothing can stand in the way of God’s election!

1. New Birth

Peter begins the body of his letter with a song of praise for what God has done for his chosen people. “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.” What a beautiful, joyful song Peter sings! It is a song of mercy. It is a song of an impossible hope that has become possible because of what Jesus did for us. When everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, had gone astray and fallen far short of God’s standard set for us in the law, he sent his Son Jesus in the form of a man to live and die in fulfillment of the law. He fulfilled the law by embodying the prophetic vision of the Messiah. He fulfilled the law’s moral requirements by “loving the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind,” and “loving his neighbor as himself.” And he fulfilled the law’s sacrificial requirements by submitting to the religious leaders and dying on the cross as the perfect Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

And after Jesus fulfilled the law in every way, satisfying God’s righteousness, God raised him from the dead so that he could inherit what was promised and be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords, the Prince of Peace who would reign over God’s kingdom forever and ever. That inheritance was not to be for him alone. He had gone there to prepare a place for all those whom God had chosen. As he told his disciples the night of his arrest (John 14:1-3), “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” It is faith in God and in Jesus that shields us by God’s power until the time of the coming of our salvation so that we can take our share of the inheritance that Jesus has obtained for us. The way to receive that inheritance is through faith in Jesus Christ’s death for the forgiveness of our sins and in his resurrection for our eternal life in God’s kingdom. That is all! Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

1. Genuine Faith

The exiled believers needed to hear the gospel message of new birth into a living hope. Who can blame them for wishing that their faith and fellowship in Christ would be enough to guarantee them victory after victory? But it wasn’t so. They were still in the world, and in fact their faith had made them targets of derision, rather than objects of envy or admiration! Nevertheless, they still had every reason to rejoice. Peter told them, “In all this you greatly rejoice, though 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.” There seems to be an endless supply of preachers who equate genuineness of faith with earthly blessings. And churches seem to compete in displaying all the ways that the faith of their parishioners has been blessed through new worship areas, gyms and video game rooms. Others emphasize rigorous orthodoxy. Still others, miracles and great faith that moves mountains. There are a lot of ideas about what demonstrates a faith of greater worth than gold.

But Peter is quite clear that genuine faith is revealed and proven through enduring suffering. Not just any suffering, mind you. It should be suffering for doing good. 1 Peter 2:12 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” 1 Peter 2:20 “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” 1 Peter 3:17-18 “For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” 1 Peter 4:1 “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.” 1 Peter 4:19 “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” Genuine faith not only endures suffering for doing good, but it also persists in doing good by faith in the inheritance that is ours through Jesus Christ. As Jesus told his disciples, (Mt 5:14,16) “You are the light of the world. …, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Peter concludes (8-9) “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.”

Why is suffering for doing good the proving ground for genuine faith? As Peter reminds us, that’s what Jesus did for us, and we are called to do likewise. We can agree that no one likes to suffer. Just writing about suffering makes me angry and irritable. Who among us has the right to tell the Ukrainian people that they should rejoice in the face of their suffering? Or tell the Uighur people that they should rejoice while being persecuted in China? Who could tell Corrie ten Boom that she should rejoice while in the concentration camps in Germany? But through faith in Jesus they could and can rejoice if they respond to their suffering by doing good, for their good deeds are the evidence of their faith in the salvation that has been secured for them. Jesus said, if we love those who love us, what credit is that to us? But if we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we are imitating the perfect love of God the Father. (Matthew 5:43-48)

Does this mean that we should seek out suffering? Or that we should not fight for justice for those who are suffering? No, and no. Again, our example is Jesus himself. We know from his prayer at Gethsemane on the night of his arrest that he did not seek the suffering that was coming but asked in all humility that it be taken from him. Nevertheless Jesus drank the cup of suffering because he was determined to rescue sinners from the injustice of their slavery to sin. We don’t have to seek out suffering. We just have to commit to doing good, and suffering will come. Look at our brothers and sisters in Russia. It is illegal even to say the word “war” in relation to the fighting in Ukraine, or to call for peace. Protesters can face expulsion from University and up to 15 years of imprisonment for doing so. Doing good; showing love; embracing others rather than crushing or destroying them; these things should be rewarded! But the world often punishes us for them, in the perverse logic of self-interest and ambition. It can make us despair and want to give up. But God the Father has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that sustains us in doing good, despite all kinds of grief and trials. Our hope is that this faith will result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter throughout his life illustrated this faith that endures and overcomes sufferings. Prior to his history-making visit to Cornelius’ household, Peter was traveling throughout Judea. He first stopped in Lydda, where he found a man who had been bedridden for 8 years, named Aeneas. Peter healed him, and many in Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord. In the nearby town of Joppa, a lovely disciple named Tabitha/Dorcas, who was always doing good and helping the poor, had fallen sick and died. The disciples there sent for Peter, and he came and found Tabitha already dead in an upstairs room. Many widows, crying, showed Peter all the ways that Tabitha had blessed them. Peter sent them out, prayed, and then called “Tabitha, get up!” She got up, and then Peter took her by the hand, and presented her to all the believers, especially the widows. Many more in Joppa believed in the Lord through Peter’s healing ministry. Peter then stayed there at Simon the tanner’s house until his vision led him to preach the gospel to Cornelius.

Peter’s example is an excellent one to follow for all Christians in any age. Medical services are much better now than they were then, but there is no shortage of people in need of the kindness and mercy that Jesus practiced, and which Peter did his best to imitate. Peter urged us that such a faith to do good is the best advertisement for the new birth and living hope that God the Father has given us. He said in 1Pe 3:13-16, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through genuine faith in him that commits to doing good we have the assurance that there is an inheritance waiting for us. God’s power is shielding us until it is revealed.

Grace and peace be ours in abundance this Easter as we celebrate together Jesus’ resurrection and the heavenly inheritance that is ours through faith in him.