

An Enduring Inheritance

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

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Revelation 6:1–8 (Common English Bible – CEB)

Then I looked on as the Lamb opened one of the seven seals. I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!”² So I looked, and there was a white horse. Its rider held a bow and was given a crown. And he went forth from victory to victory.

³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!”

⁴Out came another horse, fiery red. Its rider was allowed to take peace from the earth so that people would kill each other. He was given a large sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” So I looked, and there was a black horse. Its rider held a balance for weighing in his hand. ⁶I heard what sounded like a voice from among the four living creatures. It said, “A quart of wheat for a denarion, and three quarts of barley for a denarion, but don’t damage the olive oil and the wine.”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!”⁸ So I looked, and there was a pale green horse. Its rider’s name was Death, and the Grave was following right behind. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill by sword, famine, disease, and the wild animals of the earth.

1 Peter 1:1–9 (CEB)

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God’s chosen strangers in the world of the diaspora, who live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

²God the Father chose you because of what he knew beforehand. He chose you through the Holy Spirit’s work of making you holy and because of the faithful obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

May God’s grace and peace be multiplied to you.

³May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be blessed! On account of his vast mercy, he has given us new birth. You have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. ⁴You have a pure and enduring inheritance that cannot perish—an inheritance that is presently kept safe in heaven for you. ⁵Through his faithfulness, you are guarded by God’s power so that you can receive the salvation he is ready to reveal in the last time.

⁶You now rejoice in this hope, even if it’s necessary for you to be distressed for a short time by various trials. ⁷This is necessary so that your faith may be found genuine. (Your faith is more valuable than gold, which will be destroyed even though it is itself tested by fire.) Your genuine faith will result in praise, glory, and honor for you when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you’ve never seen him, you love him. Even though you don’t see him now, you trust him and so rejoice with a glorious joy that is too much for words. ⁹You are receiving the goal of your faith: your salvation.

God has given us a glorious inheritance.

What would you like to leave for those you love?

I don’t know about you, but it seems sometimes lately that I can hear the hoof beats of those thundering horsemen. Now, I don’t really think we are in the last days, though sometimes it feels like it. First it was Al-Qaeda, then Putin, then ISIS, and, as I write this, Dallas has the dubious distinction of the first Ebola case in the U.S. Who could blame a man for feeling a bit unsettled?

In the first century, there were Christians who were much more than unsettled. They were actively shunned and persecuted for their embrace of this god named Jesus. Their spiritual cousins today would be Christians in places like Fallujah and Mosul, who are facing choices that I pray will never be presented to those I love. Revelation was a circulating letter¹ written to such believers: those who were being variously persecuted and ostracized in Asia Minor. John intended the letter to be both encouraging and comforting. The four horsemen

¹A “circulating” letter is one that isn’t written to a specific place or person, but is meant to be circulated among the house churches across a large area. 1 Peter is also a circulating letter.

were meant as a boldly stark reminder that the Christians had done right in placing their hope and trust in God.

Though many people may place their trust in their armies (the first horseman), their police (the second), and their economies (the third) . . . but none of these can provide genuine and everlasting peace and security. There are no doctors or healthcare systems that can give us eternal life (the fourth horsemen, death).

There is only one who is worthy of our complete and unyielding trust: the LORD God. One or more horsemen may be riding across the landscape, but the believers are to be comforted in their knowledge that the anchor holds. God has not abandoned them even though it may seem that way at times. And it is to God, to Jesus Christ, that Peter points other first-century Christians who were also living through very tough times.

Introducing 1 Peter

1 Peter is a circulating letter, this one written by the apostle Peter. He writes from Rome (Peter refers to Rome as “Babylon” in 5:13) in the early 60’s AD, to encourage the Christians in central Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who “have had to suffer various trials” (1:6) and are living as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). Peter lists five areas by name as illustrated on this map.



These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are “people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”²

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the NT world, a social world driven by status and community. This ostracism created very serious economic problems for the believers, especially for those in urban settings. Customers and employers might well want nothing to do with someone who would pledge allegiance to a man named Jesus and not to Caesar. In the face of these trials, Peter urges Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (4:13).

How are these Christians to respond to their persecutors? “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” (3:9). Peter goes so far as to instruct these believers to “Honor the Emperor” (2:17).

Despite increasing hostility toward Christianity in some portions of our culture, we are not suffering because we are being persecuted for our beliefs. Nonetheless, many of us are going through very tough times and all of us are surely uncertain and apprehensive about the future. The question for those believers in Asia Minor and for us is where we will turn to find a renewed hope. What, or better, *who* will be our anchor in the midst of turbulence and fear?

A living hope

In the salutation of his letter, Peter reminds the Christians that they, despite all their difficulties, have been “chosen and destined by God the Father.” They have been sanctified (set aside for God and strengthened for holiness) by the Spirit for the purpose of being obedient to Jesus,³ an obedience which is possible because they have been “sprinkled with his blood.”

² Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans

³Notice that this salutation is “Trinitarian.” This is the work of the one God, in the persons of the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus.

Persecution of the Christian Church

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about 250AD. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60's were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians' weird practices, made them easy and tempting targets. For example, stories were told of the Christians' cannibalistic practices, such as gathering to eat the body and blood of a man, a god(?), named Jesus. Think about it!

Then, Paul begins his pastoral letter by lifting up for these believers and for us all, the living hope that is Jesus Christ. We have been born anew⁴ into "a living hope" and the ground of our hope is the truth of the resurrection (v. 3). It is the proof that justifies our hope, our confidence that our trust in God is well-placed.

As the children of God we have an inheritance that can never diminish nor be taken away. God protects our inheritance, our salvation, for us, locking it away in the vaults of heaven.

Peter wants us to rejoice in this knowledge, especially when we are going through difficulties (v. 6). A young woman in one of my classes told me of a saying that she learned a former pastor: "Christian belief is knowing that the worst thing is not the last thing." What a superb summary of the Good News. Peter, you see, reminds the believers that even though they may be suffering in the present, God is protecting for them a glorious future when God's "Last Thing" will be revealed to them for their everlasting joy.

Indeed, Peter writes, tough times test us, they test our faith. Such times can be a trial by fire, revealing the genuineness of our faith (v. 7), just as fire proves the genuineness of gold.

We may not have seen Jesus, but we love him. We have faith and we rejoice in it, for our very salvation is its end result (v. 9).

An enduring inheritance

The inheritance of which Peter speaks is our salvation, our eternal life with God and those we love. This inheritance cannot be touched by the troubles of this world or our suffering. As David Bartlett writes,

The qualities of this heavenly inheritance, that it "can never perish, spoil or fade" (NIV), suggest what it means to say that Christians are born anew to a living hope. It is a hope that no power can destroy, tarnish, or mar. What can keep believers steadfast while they await their heavenly inheritance is faith. Faith is, in part, the confidence that believers do have a treasure laid up for them that neither moth nor rust can corrupt. The letter throughout helps its readers to find what does not perish in a perishable and perishing world.⁵

A question for us to consider is what sort of inheritance we will leave those who come after us. Too often we think of this inheritance in terms of money or property – things that will not endure. But we are called by Christ to do all we can to foster faithful discipleship in all those we can possibly reach. It is easy to look at our beautiful campus and conclude that St. Andrew is a building, but, instead, we are a fellowship formed by the Holy Spirit. It is this fellowship that is enduring. It is this fellowship that is the most important inheritance any of us will leave for those who come after us.

⁴All Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been "born again"/ "born a second time"/"born from above." See John 3 and elsewhere. Using the words "born again" to refer only to a subset of Christians is a mistaken use of the phrase and clouds one's understanding of the New Testament.

⁵David, B. L. (1994–2004). The First Letter of Peter. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 12, p. 250). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

The Suffering of Christians

In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett examines Peter's teaching on the suffering of Christians.

We cannot be sure whether the suffering that Christians undergo includes actual judicial proceedings, but certainly it includes slander, innuendo, and abuse (see 2:12; 3:17; 4:14). We also cannot be sure whether the "fiery ordeal" of 4:12 is a new and more threatening example of opposition that calls forth the strong response to be brave and to rejoice or whether, as the letter draws to a close, the rhetoric takes on even greater passion.

What is clear is that in this epistle the issue is not why bad things happen to good people. Rather, the issue is how to interpret the suffering Christians undergo as a result of their conviction and confession. First Peter interprets the suffering of Christians in at least these ways:

(1) Suffering can provide for the refining of faith. As Achtemeier suggests, in 1 Pet 1:6–7 there is a comparison between the lesser and the greater: If fire can purify gold, then how much more can the fire of suffering purify the faith of those who are steadfast? There is the implication that the suffering may be sent from God and the promise that the value of faith tested by hardship will be revealed at the end (see also Matt 5:11–12).

(2) The one who suffers imitates Christ, who also suffered unjustly, not only as Christians' redeemer but also as their example (2:21–25; 3:17–18; 4:13; 5:13).

(3) Suffering is not only the result of human bad will but also is a consequence of the power of the devil (5:8).

(4) Nonetheless, part of the power of Christ's resurrection was his power to proclaim victory over the forces of evil (3:18–20). Therefore, by implication, Christians know that those who cause their suffering will also finally be judged and defeated.

(5) Suffering for being a Christian is itself a sign that the end of history is at hand (4:12–16).

(6) When Christ does return, those who have suffered for their faith will receive the reward of eternal glory, and the Spirit, which is the firstfruits of that glory, already is given to the faithful who suffer (1:7; 2:11; 4:13; 5:4, 10–11).¹

¹ David, B. L. (1994–2004). The First Letter of Peter. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 12, p. 252). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. So many people in our world embrace what is temporary, even disposable, and ignore what lasts, what endures. Do you agree with this observation? If so, why do so many simply ignore the Good News and the inheritance that it proclaims?
2. The inheritance God has given us is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." What do you want to leave behind for those you love? What can you leave them that won't perish or fade away?
3. You'll notice when reading today's passage from 1 Peter, that Peter isn't urging to believers to have faith and to rejoice. Instead, his approach is to lift up to them what he believes is true about them – they love Jesus, they rejoice, and so on. Do you see a value in this – taking the believers' faith as a given – rather than exhorting them to faith? Peter can't possibly know all these people. What do you think is the source of his confidence?
4. We don't suffer for being Christians, though many Christians in other places do. How do you think your reading of 1 Peter would change if you and your family were being persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? How can we get emotionally closer to the suffering experienced by the believers to whom Peter writes?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Malachi 2:17-3:5 & 3:16-18 A famous passage about God's refining fire and a promise that God will preserve a faithful remnant.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 3 Jesus tries to help Nicodemus, a Pharisee, understand Jesus' vocation and the new birth that Jesus offers.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ephesians 1:3-34 We have received an inheritance in Christ (v. 11)</p>	<p>Thursday, Colossians 3:1-17 Paul writes about living as those who "have been resurrected with Christ." Why do you think Paul would use the past tense in verse 1?</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 6:13-20, esp. v.19. Jesus is our hope and our anchor!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

