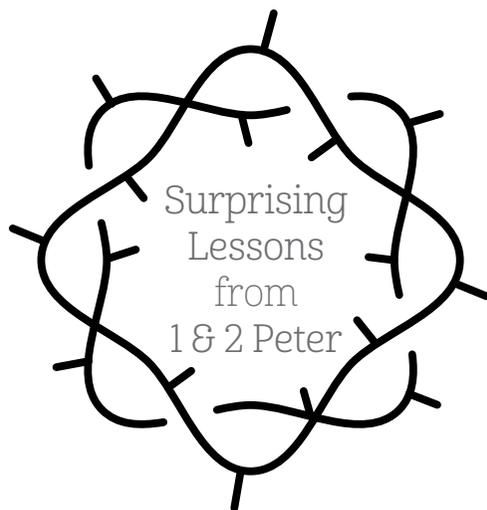


Unmistakably Christian



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Thanking God at the Wrong Time

1 Peter 1:3–7 and the Difference Rebirth Makes

We were brand new missionaries in Brazil. I had finished my PhD degree in New Testament studies in 1991 at Andrews University and was invited to teach at the Instituto Adventista de Ensino, Campus Central, in the São Paulo state of Brazil, on a beautiful campus situated in the midst of a large estate and citrus orchard.

Upon our arrival in January 1992, we lived for several weeks in dormitory rooms in the boy's dorm before transferring to our rental home. Many house-keeping activities required my attention. Just two weeks after our arrival, one of the main tasks was buying a car. Not fluent in Portuguese at this point, I depended a lot on friends to help me with the varied tasks I needed to accomplish. It is quite a task finding where to shop, setting up bank accounts, getting government papers approved, and so on—all in a foreign language.

When it was time to car shop, my friends and I set off for a city with the interesting name of Americana. This city was founded by people from the southern United States who left North America after the Civil War and came to Brazil for a new life. Some of their descendants still live in the area today. It was a beautiful sunny day, and my friends took me to see a car salesman friend of theirs.

We talked about cars and what I needed and then chose a station wagon that might fit the needs of my family. Now it was time for the test drive. Brazilians drive on the right side of the road, as Americans do, so there was no great adjustment there. I drove the vehicle around for a while with my friends and the salesman in the car. But I decided that this was not the car I wanted, and I told my friend, who translated my decision to the salesman (yes, it is a slow process to communicate everything you want to say through someone else).

They told me to turn around and go back. We were going down a hill on a four-lane road with a center divider and openings for making turns. I pulled into the central divider area and looked to my right down the hill, watching cars come up. I waited until they all passed and then pulled out to complete my U-turn.

Suddenly I heard a car horn blaring and turned to my left to see a car racing down the road that I had just seen cars going up. I had no time to react or move, and the other car plowed right into the driver's side where I was sitting. I

still remember seeing the front windshield shatter into thousands of pieces and drop down with a crash. The top of my head was cut (five stitches) and my left leg was bruised (not broken), but the overwhelming feeling I had was, “Oh no, why did this have to happen?”

I was helped out of the car. People came running from everywhere, chattering away with words I could not understand. An ambulance came and took me not much more than two hundred yards to a hospital (I could have walked there). After I was treated, my friends took me to the police department for a report. More chattering in this unknown tongue, with me at the center, silent and discouraged.

Thus began about five months of difficulties, troubles, and trials—over the car I was test driving (the salesman had no insurance on it, so I ended up buying it and never driving it again), my recovery from my injuries (not serious considering what could have happened), the loss of money (my dad graciously helped us), and hours and hours of dealing with legal issues.

I remember going in to talk to our college treasurer about the financial burden that this unexpected experience placed on us. In his cheerful way, he tried to console me, saying that everything would work out all right—God would take care of us. It was a time of pretty severe stress for my family and me, and I remember saying softly (in English, of course), as I left his office, that it was hard to be thankful or cheerful in such circumstances. It was awfully hard to thank God in the midst of such an experience; it just did not seem like a time when I could do it. It was the wrong time.

Maybe you have gone through something similar, or even worse. It is so numbing and stressful that thanksgiving just seems to die on your lips. In his first epistle, the apostle Peter seems to be talking to people who had a similar problem (and in 2 Peter, the problems only seem to get worse). Reading an epistle is something like listening to half of a phone conversation. You can sometimes catch what the conversation is about, but you may have difficulty following all the details. If we look at 1 Peter carefully, we can gather interesting bits of information about both the author and the recipients of the letter. Here are some of the things we can gather about them from examining the book.

Introduction to 1 Peter

Peter wrote to Christians living in four Roman provinces—Pontus/Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Asia (1 Peter 1:1).^{*} These four provinces were all located in what is present-day Turkey (“Asia” was simply a name of a province for the Romans, not the name of a continent as it is today). The four provinces

^{*} Pontus and Bithynia, listed separately by Peter, were joined to form one province in about 65 BC, but sometimes they were listed separately. For this and other historical details, see John Elliott, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible Commentary, vol. 37b (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 84–103.

covered an area of about 129,000 square miles, which is somewhere between the size of the states of New Mexico (121,000 square miles) and Montana (147,000 square miles). The order in which the provinces are listed would be the route a person would typically travel in carrying the apostle's message to the different churches.

The population of that area was about 8.5 million during that time, including a Jewish population of about one million. The area was mainly inland and depended on farming, herding, and mining. In Acts 2, we are told that on the Day of Pentecost, Jews and proselytes from Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia were in Jerusalem and heard Peter's preaching. These may well have become some of the first Christians to carry the gospel to this area because we have no record of Paul or other apostles working in the area of Cappadocia and Pontus. (Paul did work in Asia.)

The Christians, about forty thousand to eighty thousand in number, would be spread out across a large territory (not unlike scattered believers in rural locations today). Their rural households would be part of small communities that likely would not appreciate strangers or strange new religions. This set up social tensions that could wear down the believers' resolve to be faithful to Christ.

This is some of the feel for the situation that we get from reading 1 Peter. The apostle calls them "strangers" and resident "aliens" (1 Peter 1:1, 17; 2:11, NASB), probably because of the distinctiveness of their faith from those who surrounded them.* They would be outcasts from the social settings of paganism in which they lived (1 Peter 4:1–4). They included in their midst both free persons and slaves (1 Peter 2:16–20), wives with unbelieving husbands (1 Peter 3:1–6), husbands likely with believing wives (verse 7), community elders, and recent converts (1 Peter 5:1–5). They saw themselves as an emerging Christian community (1 Peter 2:12) but one suffering significant persecution, though mainly of a verbal type (see especially verses 11–25).

Praising God in trouble

In the introduction to the letter, 1 Peter 1:3–7, the apostle links their situation of suffering to their relationship with God. Here is what he says:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In harmony with His great mercy, He gave us rebirth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. ⁴This hope looks forward to an

* For social profile data regarding the community Peter writes to, see Elliot, *1 Peter*, 94–103. However, I, along with other scholars, disagree with Elliott's perspective on the significance of the terms *aliens* and *strangers*. Elliott feels the readers were immigrants to the area. But Peter consistently links the terms to moral concepts, and this fact militates against Elliott's perspective.

inheritance that cannot perish, cannot be defiled, cannot fade away. It is guarded for you in heaven. ⁵And by the power of God, you are protected through faith for the salvation ready to be revealed at the end of time.

⁶Dwelling in this atmosphere, you rejoice, although for a little while you may well have to feel the sting of various trials. ⁷The purpose of all this is to make your faith tried and true. That dependable quality is worth more than gold refined in fire. Gold will perish, but the tried and true in you will result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

There is much to talk about here. First, we can note that Peter has an amazing way with words. My dynamic translation of these verses smooths over the fact that in Greek, each of the paragraphs is one long sentence with wonderful ideas piled on top of each other.[†] The apostle uses alliteration and complex constructions, and he intertwines ideas that usually stand in sharp contrast to one another. But pondering these words is well worth the effort because of the payoff we get in a better understanding of how to face the trials and tribulations of life.

Beginning with God

Where does Peter begin? God. After the brief introduction of 1 Peter 1:1, 2, his first words are “Blessed be God” (verse 3). It is a typical phrase reminiscent of Old Testament passages, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Exodus 18:10, ESV); “Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel” (1 Kings 8:56, ESV); “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation” (Psalm 68:19, ESV). The usual pattern is to praise God for some wonder He has wrought in saving His people or some gracious gift He has given them. The first action is done by God; the response is praise. Thus, Peter’s phrase is based on a prior experience of the goodness of God. And this is exactly where he turns next.

What great thing has God done that calls forth the apostle’s praise? It is redemption, expressed through several word pictures—rebirth, hope, inheritance, and salvation. The interesting thing about all these ideas is that they originate with God, not with human action. Peter goes out of his way to stress that the assurance these early Christians had, the basis of their hope, resided in God and His saving work, with a concomitant emphasis on the safety of

* Throughout this book, unless otherwise noted, the translations of 1 and 2 Peter are my own. I have opted for a smooth and dynamic form of translation in 1 and 2 Peter because I will discuss the translated passages in the text.

† In fact, Joel Green goes so far as to insist that verses 3–12 are one long sentence. See Joel Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 22.

their salvation in another location—heaven. It was as though he wanted to stress that the turmoil of the present could not intrude upon the peace that resides in the heavenly home preserved for them, safe and secure in that heavenly location.

What faith means

The heavenly perspective does not take Christians to some mountaintop retreat of hermetic isolation. Nor can it be said that they escape playing a role in the great cosmic battle of good versus evil. Rather, Peter says that they are guarded by God's power through faith. The way we think of the term *faith* today is usually linked to ideas like “belief” and “trust.” We think of it as joined to concepts or truths that we hold within ourselves at the core of life as central tenets of our worldview. We also think of a sense of confidence in reliance on God based on the experience of salvation and a lifetime of getting to know Him.

These descriptions for faith are good concepts that do not run counter to Scripture. But in the ancient world, the world to which Peter wrote, the concept of faith was somewhat different. For them, *faith* meant being faithful to a relationship, particularly to the external behaviors that illustrate loyalty to a deity, group, or person.¹ As the apostle puts it in 1 Peter 1:21, “Your faith and hope are in God” (ESV). God is the source of our redemption and the focus of our relationship of salvation. Faith is not simply something we believe about God; it is our loyalty to our friendship with Him, founded and shaped by what He has done for us but also built through our experience of what life is like for a Christian in this world. Alas, all too often, that world brings us trouble—like my car accident in Americana.

Trouble changes you. That is the sometimes harsh reality I have discovered. After you go through something traumatic, you see the world through different glasses. A sight, a smell, a phrase from a book, a phone call, and it all comes back. Focusing on trouble can be both numbing and immobilizing. It certainly has a way of limiting your vision or your ability to see what the future may hold.

Peter lifts our sights. Before he discusses trouble, he talks about God, His grace, His amazing actions on our behalf, and the safe and secure character of the redemption that is ours. As Peter puts it so nicely, our inheritance “cannot perish, cannot be defiled, cannot fade away. It is guarded for you in heaven.” Not only that, God guards and protects us for that coming kingdom that cannot pass away. It is “in this atmosphere” that we are to rejoice. The “in this atmosphere” in my translation of verse 6 is literally “in which” and refers back to all the ideas of God's mercy, redemption, inheritance, and protection in verses 3–5.

Limiting persecution's power

At this point in the passage, Peter faces up to the troubles of persecution facing his readers. However, he delimits their significance with three ideas.² First, he says in verse 6 that the experience is for “a little while.” Every parent has traveled with children and had the important and pressing question come up, “When are we going to get there?” The time-honored response is, “In a little while.” The problem is, telling them that it will be thirty minutes is meaningless because they cannot tell time yet, and so we say, “In a little while.”

We are much like the child when it comes to understanding the troubles of our life. The problems seem large; the time and stress, drawn out, perhaps unbearable. For the apostle to say that they are for “a little while” may seem like a cruel underestimation of their importance. However, he is not minimizing their magnitude or power but, rather, their duration. And his chronometer has a different scale. In verse 5, he talks about our salvation prepared to be revealed “at the end of time” (literally “in the last time”). That changes our viewpoint. In one day, six hours is a fair chunk of time. In one year, it is much smaller by comparison. Peter uses God's time scale to talk about trouble, not to diminish its significance but to *put it in perspective*—something very helpful when going through endless fog.

Next, Peter delimits suffering's reach by stating literally, “if it must be.” You will notice in my translation that I have put it as “although for a little while *you may well have to* feel the sting of various trials.” The literal translation with the *if* (“if it must be”) may make it sound optional. But the construction in Greek (known as a first-class conditional clause) indicates a real condition at least for argument's sake—perhaps best translated here as “*if it has to be*” or as I have put it, “*you may well have to feel.*” This may not seem to delimit or limit suffering at all, but the way it does so is by recognizing the very real possibility of suffering persecution.

Jesus said it in a twofold way in His last days discourse in Matthew 24:6: “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for *this must take place*, but the end is not yet” (ESV; emphasis added). So, first, Jesus says, “This must take place”—it is a sinful world where terrible things happen. Jesus doesn't cover over the evil results of sin's reign as though all were smiley faces. Christians sometimes get caught in the crossfire, either because of their own mistakes or because of the weight of sin's results that have accrued over thousands of years.

But Jesus doesn't stop with the present. His second point is that “the end is not yet.” The present circumstance of trouble is placed within the wider context of the march toward His return. In this way, we see the necessity of perseverance and get some sense of how long we will have to hold on. If you have one quart of water to drink for a day, you don't drink it all at eight o'clock in the morning. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Peter's third delimitation of suffering is that the suffering will result in a good outcome—"The purpose of all this is to make your faith tried and true." The word translated "tried and true" (*dokimion*) is interesting in Greek. It means "testing," "means of testing," "genuine," "without alloy." In the ancient world, the word group associated with this term was used to describe the kind of scrutiny that people would undergo to test their fitness for holding office, citizenship, or a right to speak in an assembly.³ It was also used to refer to an assay of metals for purity. Peter's use plays on the testing of metal when he refers to gold being tried by fire. He links this to the testing of our covenant faith relationship with God by the trials of persecution. As fire removes base metal from molten gold so trials remove the dross of self-sufficiency from our experience. Gold, as precious and unchangeable as it is, cannot compare with the durability of a tested and reliable character.

What we will receive

We might say that the experience of becoming a reliable person is its own reward, as hard as it may be to endure at the time. But Peter raises our sights again. The end result of such a tried and true faith experience is the threefold benefit of praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ when He returns the second time (that great end of which He spoke in Matthew 24:6). This may sound rather self-serving and proud to our ears, but Peter's society was built on the values of honor and shame. You did things that would increase the former and avoided things that would bring the latter. Your place in society depended on this honor and shame balance.

Peter isn't saying that we earn our way to heaven, but he does note that God honors those who have passed the test of a lived faith. Perhaps the apostle was recalling something Jesus said to him. In Matthew 19, the story of the rich young ruler is told. This young man came to Jesus wanting to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life (a very important question!). Jesus talked to him about obeying the commandments, which the young man seemed to think he had done quite well. But he still felt a lack and asked what else he needed to do. "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me," is what Jesus said (verse 21, ESV). The young man went away sad because he was very rich. Jesus went on to say that the only way to get to heaven was by God's power, for, "with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (verse 26, ESV).*

* This is where the famous "camel passing through the eye of a needle" text occurs (see Matthew 19:24). Counter to much popular belief, in Jesus' day, the "eye of a needle" did not refer to a small gate through which a camel could just squeeze if all its baggage were removed and it knelt down. Instead, Jesus was speaking in hyperbole—the largest common animal (a camel) and the smallest hole (the real eye of a real sewing needle) most people knew—thus a feat that would be impossible without the power of God!

Then Peter asked Jesus a question that seems to miss the point. “Look, we have left everything and followed you,” he said. “So, what will we get?” You and I might say to him, “Rank materialist! Don’t you get it? Just being with Jesus is the point; that’s where the ‘great reward’ is.” But that is not how Jesus responded. He took this sincere question seriously, and He responded with a promise of honor and wealth to His faithful followers in verses 28–30: “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (ESV).

Heaven, you see, is a real place with real mansions and streets of gold. There we will experience the deepest joys, plan enterprises that people have never dreamed of here, go to worlds no earthly traveler has ever seen, and continually grow in our knowledge and appreciation of God’s incredible grace. Our inheritance there is secure, guarded by God Himself.

In light of these great truths that Peter presents to us at the opening of his letter, we can better understand his declaration of joy in the face of the bonds of suffering in our present life. A car crash in Brazil, financial setbacks, deprivations, even deeper troubles like persecution and imprisonment must not be allowed to tarnish our joy. I still have a lot to learn about this. Come with me on the rest of the journey through Peter’s two profound letters as we mine the gems these books contain.

1. See John Elliott, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible Commentary, vol. 37b (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 340.

2. Elliot, 339, 340. See also J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 25–30; and Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 100, 101.

3. See Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. “δόκιμος,” and Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. “δοκιμάζω.”