

Are you living in Exile?

1 Peter 1:1-23

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My prayer is that the question “Are you living in exile?” should make us reflect on how we conduct ourselves throughout the time of our pilgrimage on this earth, for we will suffer grief –for a little while– in all kinds of trials. So, what do we need to know and practice so that our reaction to suffering be the right one?

A brief background to Peter’s first letter:

- Written to exiles away from home, experiencing difficulties and the hardships of life.
- Peter himself is in exile, writing from Rome (5:13) where church tradition says he was martyred with other Christians, by Nero, around 64 A.D., as scapegoats for the fire that destroyed part of Rome.
- This event points to the epistle being written around 60 A.D.
- The exiles were scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (now part of modern-day Turkey). These order in which these providences are stated may indicate route taken by the messenger who delivered the letter –probably Silas (1 Pe. 5:12).

There are various themes in this first epistle of the apostle Peter. We will centre our thoughts on two of them:

One of the main themes is **suffering**, which is not surprising given the fact that it was written to exiles (pilgrims, foreigners...), who are young in the faith: *“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation”* (1 Pe. 2:2). Peter sends them a message of encouragement intended to remind them that they were God’s special people (1:2 & 2:9) –separated for God for a specific purpose– and that their sufferings were a temporary testing and had also a particular purpose.

The other notable characteristic of this epistle is that it is **Christ centred** –the apostle refers to our Lord around 20 times in 5 short chapters: he is drawing our attention constantly to our Lord, who is our salvation.

Here is a list of the verses that refer to the suffering of the exiles Peter writes to (1:6, 2:12 & 19-20, 3:14 & 17, 4:12-13, 16 & 19, 5:9-10) and the ones that refer just to the suffering of our Lord (1:11 & 19, 2:21 & 23, 3:18, 4:1 & 13, 5:1). We note that there is a reference to suffering in every single chapter.

My objective this morning is to take these two themes (suffering in exile and what the Lord has done for us) to see, at a very basic level, how they relate to each other in causing an impact on our way of thinking, and in causing an impact on how we live life as exiles, for that is what we all are, 'pilgrims and strangers on the earth', 'temporary residents' whose true home is in heaven (1 Peter 1:1 & 4; Heb. 11:13-14).

When we approach the subject of suffering, we do so with extreme care, as it is a deeply personal and emotional issue that can shake the very foundation of our existence, even of our faith. May God, therefore, speak to us individually according to our own circumstances and need in relation to our own personal suffering.

Let us first turn our attention to the themes of "suffering", which is constantly addressed throughout the epistle. Peter's readers are going through difficult times; many Bible scholars believe that the variety of their suffering refers to social exclusion or general harassment, and not to state instigated persecution, which would be unleashed with a vengeance in the 2nd century and would reach its peak at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century. This letter does not mention persecution per se, though it would reach them in Asia Minor around 90-96 AD. Instead of official persecution, Peter refers to suffering that comes from a hostile environment, from the hostile society they are living in as strangers, as exiles ("*various trials*" 1:6; "*speak against you as evil doers*" 2:12; "*endures sorrows while suffering unjustly*" 2:19; "*you are slandered*" 3:16). We can imagine the lives these people lived, perhaps relegated to the fringes of society, as misfits, looked upon as a threat to others, which is just one expression of the multitude forms of suffering that comes with living in a fallen world.

But Peter also refers to suffering as a common experience that should be considered the expected lot of anyone who is a Christian: ("*do not be surprised at the fiery trial*" 4:12, "*rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings*" 4:13, and "*Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name*" (4:16), and "*the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world*" 5:9).

Suffering, therefore, is the *common experience* of every human being living in a fallen world. But Christians have an *extra source of suffering*, which is a result of our identification with our Lord. It follows, therefore, that we Christians are not exempt from either type of suffering, for our Lord suffered and we should expect to be mistreated and mocked too! We would be wrong to expect to live life protected from all types of dangers and suffering simply because we are Christians, for we are still human beings living in a fallen world and therefore exposed to its many forms of suffering, be it disease, accidents, or the effects of the actions of others upon us (prejudices, abuse and discrimination towards exiles and immigrants, etc.).

This is the unjust world we inhabit, but even when we accept it as part of life, many a time, unfortunately, our human nature takes centre stage, and we begin to complain: why should I have to go through this?, why is this happening to me?, why does God allow it? It is obviously no comfort to the sufferer simply to know he/she should expect difficult and painful circumstances in their lives.

This, of course, raises various questions, for when we come face to face with the darker side of life (pain, disease, injustices, broken relationships, untimely death of loved ones, to mention just a few) that shakes our own little world and send us scurrying for cover, what stands firm amid all the uncertainties of life? What stands unalterable around us in the face of changing, challenging, difficult

and unjust circumstances that perplex us, that cause us to wobble, that bring us down, and even shake our faith? **Where do we turn to?**

Peter has this question in mind when he writes to the exiles living in a hostile society –product of a fallen world– and therefore subject to what goes with it: suffering rejection from those around them, being ostracized, likely have been seen as a nuisance, even competition, and all this possibly affecting their health. In a nutshell, they are at the mercy of what others are doing to them and at the mercy of the darker side of life.

In contrast to what others are doing to them and what life is throwing at them, the apostle Peter reminds them of what the Lord has done and is doing for them, and for us! There are three aspects that I wish to highlight:

1. What the Lord has done for me: He has rescued ME (verse 18).

Please notice what it **does NOT say**, and perhaps we would have expected Peter to have said:

- He does **not** say we are rescued from *condemnation*: ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”*** (Ro. 8:1).
- He does **not** say we are rescued from the power of *sin*: ***“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin”*** (Ro. 6:6-7).
- He does **not** say we are rescued from the *dominion of darkness*: ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son”*** (Col. 1:13).

All the above are of course true, but what Peter is saying is that the Lord has rescued us from our “futile ways”. Before we dwell on this, let us first turn for a minute to:

2. How did He rescue me: “with the precious blood of Christ” (verse 19).

An illustration might help us to begin to understand what this means. What would you say if I offered to sell you my rather basic smartphone for €5.000? You would decline the offer, because the measure of what you pay must be proportional to the worth of the item. Imagine then your worth to your Creator, that He should give His life so that you might live.

When in our despair and hurt we question the reason for our suffering or, as King David did, we become impatient with God demanding from Him to break his silence and answer us, let us meditate on and grasp the immense dimension of God’s love for us: ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”*** (John 15:13). We must turn to Him, for he cares, He is by our side and aware of our situation: ***“cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you”*** (1 Pe. 5:7). We can only find consolation in Him, who ***“has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”*** (Is. 53:5 & Mt. 8:17). And it’s not just our life that is invaluablely precious, our faith is too (v. 7) so He will care for it too, as we shall see.

3. What did He rescue me from: “from your futile ways” (verse 18).

Before going further, allow me an illustration. “Nueva Luz” is an evangelical Christian ministry which provides spiritual assistance to the blind and visually impaired, by means of the Bible in braille and audio material (Bible, Christian books and journals, etc.). It was started by a Christian brother and leader of one of the evangelical churches here, in Madrid. Due to an accident and after many

operations on his eyes due to detached retinas, he was left totally blind. He went through a period of confusion, bitterness, despair, deep pain, and through a time of questioning the Lord. (This is part of the necessary grieving process, which must be respected and treated with great sensitivity by those around the sufferer). When the Lord considered it appropriate, He sent him a missionary brother with a message, which was basically “it is now time to change your way of thinking”.

This is exactly what Peter is saying in this passage we are looking at this morning, have you noticed it? Yes, it is true, we have been rescued from *condemnation*, from the *power of sin*, from the *dominion of darkness*, to mention just a few things, but what Peter is specifically saying here is: **“rescued from your futile ways”** ... which includes being rescued from our deeply ingrained human thought patterns that do not contribute to our process of salvation.

Back to the illustration. The missionary said to the blind brother: stop asking *yourself* “WHY?” and ask *God* “WHAT FOR?” Ask Him what is the purpose of you going blind.

This is what Peter is saying: please notice verse 6 and how it flows into verse 7: **“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”** Did you notice it? The **“so that”** is the **“WHAT FOR?”** I’m referring to the test of faith, so that we may see how *genuine* it is, know where it needs to *grow deeper and more robust* and to determine whether it is being sidetracked even!

Our blind brother’s way of thinking changed radically, from “WHY?” to “WHAT FOR?”, and the “Nueva Luz” (New Light) ministry to the blind and visually impaired was born, serving them here in Spain and Spanish speaking countries of Central and Latin America. “New Light” he called it; having gone through a time of grieving with the Lord by his side, his physical darkness was turned into a ministry of spiritual light for the benefit of others. What a change in his “futile way” of thinking.

When we go through suffering and trials, we will ultimately only make sense of them when we put them in the context of our salvation:

A. On the one hand, in the context of the **immense love Christ** has for us - we are precious to Him and He is the source of all comfort: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God”** (2 Co. 1:3-4).

B. On the other hand, suffering has purpose in our salvation, which is to test “the genuineness of your faith” (v. 7):

- Is it responding as it should?
- Does it meet the expected specifications?
- Does it need improvement?
- Is it fostering a deeper relationship with the Lord?
- Is it fit for purpose in serving our Lord? Did you notice the “so that” again in the verse quoted above? The comfort that we receive from God in all our afflictions has also the purpose of enabling us to be a comfort to others. This was the outcome of the trial our blind brother went through, for “Nueva Luz” ministered to thousands of others in their own blindness.

It is part of the process of our salvation to exercise our faith as we go through life, and to do so in a very practical way: trusting and resting on our Lord amid life's multiple circumstances and experiences, suffering included! But it's not easy, is it? I very much identify with the father of the story registered in Mark's gospel, chapter 9. His son is suffering greatly from what appears to be epilepsy and Jesus says: *"Everything is possible for one who believes"*, to which the father replies, with disarming honesty: *"I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"* Isn't that our own experience? We need to bring our faith down to the practicalities of life, beyond the intellectual dimension!

We end with a variation of the title question: We are living in exile, for we are temporary residents of earth but citizens of heaven, so, are we living *as* exiles? *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect!"* (Ro. 12:2)

Afflictions are used by God to strengthen our faith: purify our hearts, increase our love for our Lord Jesus Christ, deepen our dependence upon Him, strengthen our hope in His many precious promises, and increase our faith in His Word.

May the Lord speak to us individually in accordance with our own particular circumstances and needs.