

Grace to you from God our Father and from the one who gained salvation through His Righteousness and who offers His peace, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

As we begin our 5 week focus on the Book of First Peter, it's appropriate to start out with a bit of background on this book. Written in the year 64 AD, First Peter was most probably written by the Apostle and the unofficial leader of the Disciples personally selected by Jesus Himself. Peter is known for being impulsive, often speaking and acting before putting his brain in gear. For example, he was the first to recognize and say out loud that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of the living God. Unfortunately, he had no clue, at that point, pre-crucifixion, what that actually meant. In the very next verse, when Jesus was trying to explain that being the Messiah, he would undergo suffering and death, but three days later would rise from the dead, Peter began to rebuke Jesus saying this would not happen on his watch. To that Jesus replied, "Get behind me Satan. Your mind is set on human things not heavenly things." Peter is the one who got out of the boat and tried to walk on water, but took his eyes off Jesus and then began to sink. He cut off the ear of the slave of the High Priest when Jesus was arrested and Jesus had to restore the man's ear while telling Peter and the rest of his followers that if they live by the sword, they will surely die by the sword. Finally, of course, Peter is the one who vehemently denied even knowing Jesus in the courtyard after Jesus was arrested, but then was forgiven and restored by the risen Christ by the Sea of

Galilee with the threefold questions. “Do you love me, then feed my sheep.” After the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, Peter as well as the rest of the disciples were changed. Peter, whose name means “Rock” went from being like a rock that sinks to the bottom of the ocean, to the rock star preacher and leader of the new community founded on faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and God’s only begotten Son.

That’s a little background on what we know about the man, Peter, but what about this letter he wrote? Why did he write it and who should pay attention to it? In the year 64 AD Christians were considered odd and a bit weird. At first they were thought to be just one more sect within the Jewish Religion. By the year 64 they were being considered a separate religion and, with Nero as the Emperor of the Roman Empire, the writing was on the wall concerning their fate. Christians were beginning to feel the persecutions from at least three sides. They were being kicked out of the synagogues and ostracized from the places where they had been allowed to worship by the Jewish people. They were increasingly facing suffering and even torture and death because they dared to claim Jesus as their God and Lord rather than Nero. In the year 65 AD Nero most likely ordered a very populated section of Rome to be set on fire and he famously fiddled while Rome burned. He did this in order to blame the Christians and thereby have a good reason for the public to hate them and to persecute them and kill as many as possible. So,

Christians were persecuted by the Jews, by the Roman Government, but what was the third group that persecuted them? It was their own families. When a person claimed Jesus Christ as their Lord, it not only put themselves in grave danger, but also their family members. Therefore, those family members who did not wish to face that suffering and who did not share the same faith in Jesus, often betrayed their Christian brothers and sisters and turned them over to the Roman soldiers.

Peter saw what was happening and where this was headed. He wanted to warn his fellow Christians about the dangers and to encourage them to continue to keep the faith despite the suffering and danger he knew was ahead. The letter we call First Peter is a “Circular” letter meaning that it was carried from congregation to congregation probably along the main postal route because that’s where the roads were located. Peter was most likely located in Rome at the time of the writing of this letter. He had seen firsthand the suffering and persecution that was beginning to take place. This morning Kathy read from the Message Bible, which is a modern paraphrasing of the original Greek writings. In the NRSV, which we normally read from, rather than simply saying to the Exiles scattered to the four winds, the NRSV lists the actual places where this circular letter was addressed and was hand carried to. We don’t know who founded many of the Churches mentioned here, but it’s a safe bet that at least some of them may have been founded by Peter himself.

Now you know as much as I do about the context of this letter. Let's look at the message it held for those early Christians and see if there's something there for us as well. After the greeting and blessing, Peter gets right into theology. His description and definition of Salvation still applies to us today. I just love the way Eugene Peterson, who wrote the Message version of the Bible puts it, "Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for,⁴ including a future in heaven—and the future starts now!⁵ God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you'll have it all—life healed and whole." Yes, we have a future in Heaven with Jesus, but our future starts today! As wonderful as that sounds, we are still here in this world where suffering still affects all of us. We certainly don't face the same three-sided attack from the government, the Jewish people, and our own families that those early Christians faced and we don't risk being thrown in the arena with hungry wild animals just because we worship Jesus Christ, but there are still places in this modern world where Christians do face many of these same persecutions.

Our suffering today is mostly based on the trespasses of others and our own march toward the inevitable decline in health and eventual death. We grieve over our loved ones who have passed even as we ourselves can feel the slow decline of aging setting in on us. The message of salvation is the same whether you're

suffering is due to persecution or other life situations. The day is coming, says Peter, when you'll have it all! In the meantime, how are we to live?

That's a good question and Peter is sure to give us his divinely inspired advice. First off we can see that we were chosen by God to be His elect, his holy people. We are saved by faith alone. Faith is a deep trust that you know is true even if you haven't seen the end, yet... You might be tempted to think that faith is the same as belief. Faith, trust, and belief in the Greek language are one and the same, but in English they are very different. Belief is an intellectual thing where you make up your own mind about something. Faith is something more. It requires something to have faith in. For example, faith in Jesus and the promises of God for our eternal salvation. Even the devil believes in Jesus. The difference is the devil doesn't have faith or trust in the promises of God or in the ability of Jesus to carry out all those wonderful promises. Because God acted to raise Jesus from the dead, God has demonstrated His power to fulfill His promise of Salvation. You've heard it said, through faith in Jesus, God is extending that same power over sin, death, and the devil to us giving us eternal life and salvation. I say that's not quite right. Through the faith and trust of Jesus we are now included in God's elect. It was Jesus' faith, Jesus' trust, and ultimately Jesus' righteousness that saves, not any faith or belief of our own.

Here's how I see this working out for us. Imagine you need surgery to replace a worn-out hip. You know there's going to be pain and suffering. The doctor assures you that the period of pain and suffering will be limited and after a time you'll be better off than you are now. You go through the surgery and sure enough you do have great pain and as you go through the physical therapy there's a lot more pain and suffering... After that time though, you begin to feel better and because of the new hip you're able to move around much better and the pain you experienced was just part of your healing. Now you can keep up with your grandchildren and enjoy life complete and whole. Peter would say that's how we Christians should understand our minor persecutions and our major sufferings. They are no more than the healing pangs that refine our faith and strengthen our trust that God is with us in everything.

May God bless us even in our suffering and may we come out on the other side stronger and better because of our experiences with pain and suffering. May God bless us as we study this letter of First Peter and may we learn from the earliest Christians how to remain steadfast in faith and trust in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ all our days. Amen.