

The End of Exile (1 Peter 4:1-19)

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. 2 As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. 3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. 5 But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

7 The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. 8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

17 For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And,

'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'

19 So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

1. By this stage in the letter, Peter is starting to repeat himself, returning to things he has written earlier. This is no bad thing. He wants to make sure his readers have really 'got it'.

2. Two questions:

(a) *What do you find in this passage that Peter has written about before and wants to emphasize?*

(b) *What new subjects does he introduce here, or any new angles on what he has written earlier?*

3. Peter continues to write about how to respond to suffering, underlining what he has already written but adding some fresh insights:

- (a) You are experiencing or likely to experience suffering, and this should not come as a surprise (v12).
- (b) If you are going to suffer, make sure it is as a Christian, not because of your bad behaviour (vv15-16).
- (c) Christ also suffered and is an example to you when you are suffering – in fact, you are participating in his sufferings (vv1, 13).
- (d) Rejoice in times of hardship for three reasons: because it is a privilege to suffer as a Christian, because it can be a blessing, and because glory lies ahead (vv13, 14, 16).
- (e) Suffering can be seen as a test of faith (v12), as an opportunity to break the hold of sin in your lives (v1) and as a challenge to trust God and submit to God's will (v19).

4. We need to remember that the suffering Peter is writing about is persecution and that, while this may not be our experience in Kent, it is for many Christians today. This letter can help us to understand their situation and pray for them.

5. We may, of course, experience other forms of suffering, and at least some of what Peter writes is relevant to all forms of suffering. Perhaps the most important thing to hold on to is a *sense of perspective*. Peter has emphasized this before – the glory that lies ahead outweighs all present suffering.

6. Peter introduces some new elements in this passage: one of these is that the end is near (v7) and it is time for judgment to begin (v17). How do we interpret this?

- (a) There are many indications in the New Testament that the early Christians thought history was about to end and Jesus would reappear. They were wrong.
- (b) Throughout the past 2000 years in most generations people have thought that the end was near. So far, they have also been wrong.
- (c) Many people today think we are nearing the end of history and expect Jesus to return soon. Are they right? One generation will be! Or has human history still many centuries to run? Jesus was clear that nobody knows except God (Matthew 24:36).
- (d) But Peter and the other New Testament writers were right as well as wrong. It is about *perspective*. Just as suffering will be outweighed by glory, so our brief lives and the whole of human history are mere flashes in the light of eternity. In that sense, the end is always near. We are exiles now but exile is not permanent: it will end and we will be home.

7. There's quite a bit in this passage about judgment:

- (a) God will judge the living and the dead (v5). There is another difficult verse here (v6). It seems to mean that some of the exiles who have now died were regarded by their human judges as troublemakers but have now been vindicated by God and are enjoying his presence.
- (b) Judgment begins with God's household (v17) – the 'oikos' word again – and will extend to all humanity.
- (c) Judgment is a solemn word. Peter does not minimise its significance. All of us will have to give account to God of how we have lived (v5).
- (d) Peter assures his readers that this applies to those who persecute them, although he leaves their destiny to the imagination of his readers (v17).
- (e) But it is also an incentive to holy living – to the kind of behaviour that Peter has been advocating throughout his letter. More on this in a moment.
- (f) And it is an encouragement to suffering exiles – God will put everything right, turning pain and fear into shouts of joy.

(g) Judgement is not primarily about punishment. It is about justice, righting wrongs and restoring harmony to all creation (Acts 3:19-21; Colossians 1:20). The judgement of a good and gracious God is actually wonderful good news!

8. In light of the coming judgment, Peter urges his readers to renounce certain ways of behaving:

(a) There is quite a list in verses 3-4: debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, detestable idolatry, reckless, wild living. Verse 15 adds murder, theft and criminality.

(b) Remember – these are first-generation Christians from a pagan background. Their lives have been radically transformed by the gospel.

(c) ***How do you respond to this list?*** Has anyone been involved recently in murder, theft, orgies, drunkenness or wild living?

(d) Before we dismiss these verses as not relevant to us, let's note two things.

(e) First, if we want new people to respond to the gospel and join our church, we will need to be ready to welcome people with this kind of background and be patient with them as they learn to live differently. Peter reminds us that 'love covers a multitude of sins' (v8) – we will need to be a gracious, forgiving, welcoming community.

(f) Second, let's not miss two other sins in this passage: grumbling (v9) and meddling (v15). These may seem minor by comparison but these 'respectable' sins can destroy communities.

9. So how are we to live in the 'oikos', God's household?

(a) Peter uses two very general but demanding phrases: 'love each other deeply' (v8) and 'continue to do good' (v19). Both require commitment and persistence in the face of temptation to do otherwise.

(b) But there are also some specifics, including offering hospitality (v9). Hospitality is a very important issue in the New Testament. Welcoming new people into our circle of friends, sharing meals, inviting people into our homes. With ongoing restrictions, we may need to find new ways of practising hospitality, but let's be creative (and call it 'physical distancing', not 'social distancing').

(c) And Peter urges his readers to use their gifts in God's household. Some may have speaking gifts, others serving gifts, but they are all needed (vv10-11). Peter describes the exiles as 'faithful stewards', household-managers who use their gifts to serve the other members of the household and bring glory to the Head of the household.

(d) Using our gifts in the household requires several things: discovering our gifts (we may need each other's help in this); practising and developing our gifts (inviting help and feedback); asking God for strength and inspiration; and checking our motives – these gifts are not to puff us up but to serve others (v10).