

Message #13

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1 Peter

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RESPONDING TO SUFFERING
IN THE GREAT COSMIC CONFLICT

1 PETER 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Benedict Arnold had a successful apothecary business in Connecticut in the 1700s. He was involved in preparing medicines and selling related supplies, which involved trade with

Great Britain. When fighting broke out with the British, he felt the call of duty to contribute to the war effort. He had been a volunteer in the French and Indian War, in which his leadership skills had been recognized.

So in volunteering to serve his state and his country in this conflict, Benedict Arnold knew something of the cost that would be involved. He was made a captain and led his troops in helping to capture Fort Ticonderoga in New York in 1775. He was disappointed when command of the captured fort was given to someone else. Then a month later his wife died. More suffering. That fall Arnold was part of an unsuccessful campaign that sought to dislodge the British from Quebec. He was wounded in the fighting that happened there. More suffering.

Benedict Arnold continued to lead troops in the war. His sharp temper got him in trouble with other commanders. He felt that he was passed over for several promotions. He spent much of his own money to support his troops, and Congress was very slow to repay him. He became bitter.

In Philadelphia he was attracted to a young, attractive socialite. Peggy Shippen was only 18, and Arnold was 38. But they married in 1779. It was expensive to keep up their social life, and Benedict Arnold became involved in some shady business dealings to support his lifestyle. His wife was also a loyalist sympathizer.

George Washington trusted Benedict Arnold and put him in charge of West Point. But Arnold gave in to the tempting offer that the British made of 10,000 pounds sterling for giving away West Point to them as well as for receiving a commission in the British army. His communications with the British were intercepted, and Benedict Arnold had to flee for his life. He ended up in London, but on this side of the pond, his name became synonymous with being a traitor.

We Christians have likewise been called to participate in a great cosmic conflict. Our involvement also involves sacrifice and suffering and temptation. The Apostle Peter recognized that fact in his first epistle. He was telling his audience how to respond to these challenges. The suffering that he had especially in mind was caused by non-Christian neighbors, hostile governments, unsympathetic employers, and unsaved husbands. In our passage today he suggests that the temptation we face in the midst of suffering is to respond in ways that are characteristic of our old life without Christ. But the apostle also goes on to talk about how we can avoid that, how we can avoid turning out like Benedict Arnold.

We who face our own sufferings, big and small, need to know what Peter has to tell us. How can we avoid becoming casualties in the cosmic war between good and evil? How can we overcome temptation in the midst of suffering?

I.

Peter says that there are two basic things that we Christians need to do. First, RESPONDING TO SUFFERING MEANS LIVING FOR THE WILL OF GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- RESPONDING TO SUFFERING...) That is the message of vv. 1 & 2, which is found on p. 1016 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs.

A.

The first aspect of living for the will of God is FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS. (I.A. LIVING FOR THE WILL OF...) Peter writes in v. 1, **“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin...”**

A central concern of this book is the suffering of Christians. Peter has stressed that Jesus followers should follow the example of Jesus, who also suffered. Thus in #2 v. 21 (1 PETER 2:21) the apostle wrote, **“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”** Jesus endured much opposition from His fellow Jews, who should have recognized that He was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. But they opposed Him. At first the opposition was verbal. But eventually the opposition was physical. They had Him crucified. But

there was a purpose for this suffering. Jesus died to pay the penalty of sins for those who would follow Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Because of what Jesus has done for us, it is only appropriate that we be willing to suffer for Him. Thus we are to “arm” ourselves. That word was a military term that was used of preparation for battle. So the picture is that we are to prepare ourselves for conflict. We are to enter this great cosmic conflict with the expectation that we will suffer. We are going to take some shots if we seek to live for Him, if our determination is to live for the will of God. We need to arm ourselves with “the same way of thinking,” that is, we are to enter spiritual battle with the realization that suffering may come our way, but it will be worth it in the end. For we saw last week that good wins no final triumph except out of the jaws of apparent defeat. And the faithful endurance of suffering leads to ultimate triumph.

Determining the meaning of the second part of v. 1 is somewhat difficult. What does it mean: “...**whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin...**”? Could it be referring to Christ? Jesus never sinned. So it could not be saying that He stopped sinning at some point. Perhaps it could be understood in the sense that Jesus in His death finished dealing with sin. But that still is a rather strange way to put it. Then also Peter seems to be talking about Christians and their dealing with sin.

Secondly, some understand Peter to be talking about Christians who, by virtue of their identification with Jesus, have been freed from sin. In Romans #6 v. 7 (ROMANS 6:7) the Apostle Paul says, “**For one who has died has been set free from sin.**” The difficulty with that understanding, however, is that Peter is talking about suffering and not death. He does not seem to be talking about the same kind of thing. What Paul says is doctrinally right, of course. But when Peter uses the term “flesh” in his book, he is not talking about the sin nature. He is talking about the physical body. So it seems more likely that in our verse he is simply talking about physical suffering that comes along with being a Christian and being a human being.

What is Peter saying then? I think it is more likely that he is saying that those who arm themselves to face suffering demonstrate that they have triumphed over sin. They have turned from the sinful activities of their past and have entered the cosmic battle involving good and evil. Along the way they take flack for that decision. Following the will of God means following the example of Jesus.

B.

LIVING FOR THE WILL OF GOD also MEANS RECOGNIZING OUR LIMITED TIME. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. LIVING FOR THE...RECOGNIZING OUR LIMITED TIME) That idea comes out of the first part of v. 2: **“...so as--- purpose, why we should not yield to temptation in the midst of suffering--- to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions...”**

For non-Christians this earthly life is all that there is. “Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we shall die.” Comedian Richard Pryor once remarked, **“Enjoy as much as you can even if you live to be ninety, because that’s not as long as you’re going to be dead.”**

We Christians ought to have a different perspective. We do have a limited time on earth. But we are living for eternity. How we live our lives here has eternal consequences. We ought to endure suffering and resist temptation in order to pursue the will of God.

Moses as an old man wrote Psalm 90. (PSALM 90:10) Beginning in v. 10 he wrote, **“The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. (PSALM 90:11-12) Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”** Life is short. The brevity of life should motivate us to resist temptation in the midst of suffering.

C.

Besides determining to follow the example of Jesus and recognizing our limited time, we Christians should respond to suffering by OBEYING GOD. (I.B.C. LIVING FOR... OBEYING GOD) In the last part of v. 2 Peter urges his listeners to live for the will of God. God has revealed His will to us in the Bible. The issue is obedience.

A neighbor lady offered to take care of a little girl while her mother was in the hospital for several days. Before entering the hospital the mother wrote out a list of foods which the girl liked. Then she told her child, **“My dear, eat what our kind neighbor prepares for you and thank her.”**

The little girl thought for a moment and then said, **“I’ll eat what she gives me, if she gives me what I like.”** How often we Christians are like that! We say that we will do God’s will. But when push comes to shove, we do God’s will too often only if it agrees with our will.

The fundamental issue is: Who will be in charge of our lives? Will it be the Lord--- or will it be me? To overcome temptation in the midst of suffering we have to allow the Lord to be in charge and to choose His will.

Billy Graham in his book *Approaching Hoofbeats* says, **“We think of modern Christians living under atheistic or totalitarian regimes as being the only ones who must daily decide their ultimate loyalties. It is not true. Every Christian in every nation--- totalitarian, democratic or somewhere in between--- decides daily to be loyal to Christ... or to give in to this age and its values.”** Living for the will of God requires obedience to Jesus.

II.

In vv. 3-6 we find that RESPONDING TO SUFFERING MEANS not only living for the will of God but also TURNING FROM A SINFUL LIFESTYLE. (III. RESPONDING TO SUFFERING MEANS TURNING FROM A SINFUL LIFESTYLE) Such is the message of these four verses.

A.

In vv. 3 & 4 Peter says that TURNING FROM A SINFUL LIFESTYLE MEANS REJECTING EXCESSES OF DISSIPATION. (II.A. TURNING FROM... EXCESSES OF DISSIPATION) That is the terminology that our text uses in v. 4. In vv. 3 & 4 he writes, **“For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you...”**

Many of the Christians to whom Peter was writing were Gentiles. The descriptions that he uses here for various kinds of sin seem to be especially characteristic of what are called “mystery religions” practiced in Asia Minor by many of the Gentiles. These mystery religions, called that because of the secret rituals they had, involved idol worship, secret rituals, feasting, drinking, wild dancing, and sexual immorality.

As v. 4 indicates, non-Christian friends could not understand why these Christian converts did not participate in these activities any more--- why they “do not join them.” Because the Christians stopped participating in these activities, they took flack for it. They became social outcasts.

Moral standards in the Roman Empire at this time were very low. The Roman historian Tacitus, who was not a Christian, complained in the first century, **“In high society and in the slave community alike we know of prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, child exposure and concern only for bread and circuses.”**

Idol worship and attendance at temples were interwoven into the social fabric of the day. If you were part of a trade guild, meetings were often held in a temple. People who were loyal to Rome were expected to regard the emperor as a god. Christians couldn't participate in many of these activities. Romans expected people in the various parts of the empire to add gods to the religious and cultural perspective of their areas. But when Christians came along and claimed that there was only one true God, and the others were fakes, that caused social tensions. Later on it led to active persecution from the government. Christians faced pressure to return to their former lifestyles.

It is not all that different today. The cultural elites are often accepting of various religious perspectives. It is when Christians come along and claim that there is only one way to God and that certain behaviors are morally wrong, that we encounter problems. This is especially evident on college campuses.

A number of colleges across the country have adopted rules that require student groups to make offices in their organization open to any student on the campus. Christian groups have had the audacity to require that officers in their groups be Christians. For that reason, a number of Christian groups have been expelled from their campuses. The University of Iowa expelled Business Leaders in Christ and Intersity Christian Fellowship. Both groups required officers who were Christians and who followed traditional Christian teaching on sexual morality. We can't allow groups that hold to those values on our college campuses, can we?

It turns out that the Chinese Students and Scholars Association was allowed to limit membership to Chinese students, and the Iowa Hawkapellas, an a capella singing group, could limit their membership to only women. So fortunately a federal judge earlier this month ruled that the Christian groups had to be reinstated. This is the kind of world in which we live, and we Christians are told to resist the pull of this worldly thinking and behaving.

For many of us, the pressure to give in to temptation, to go back to worldly ways of living, comes not from the cultural leaders of society but from friends and family and neighbors and coworkers who don't like our Christian values and standards. We don't have fun with them like we once did, and perhaps we

make them feel guilty. The temptation also comes from our own sin nature which may pull us back to our old lifestyle and addictions.

Justin Martyr was a Christian leader who lived in the second century. He described the lifestyle of the Christian community a few decades after the time of Peter: **“We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone. We who formerly used magical arts dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone who is in need. We who hated and destroyed one another on account of our different customs and would not even live with men of a different race, now since the coming of Christ live on excellent terms with them; and pray for our enemies and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the precepts of Christ; to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God, the Ruler of all.”** (*First Apology*, Chapter 14)

For the most part these early believers resisted the temptation to yield to sin in the face of suffering. Justin Martyr himself was ordered at the end of his life to offer a pinch of incense to the Roman gods. But what was to the Romans a mere cultural formality and a basic sign of patriotism was to Justin a denial of the true God who alone deserved worship. So for his refusal to concede to this temptation he was killed. Such is the commitment to obedience that God desires of us today--- a commitment that perseveres in the face of suffering.

B.

So Peter’s encouragement to Christians is to resist temptation to give in to persecution and to other forms of suffering. Reject the excesses of dissipation that marked your previous life. In v. 5 he adds that turning from a sinful lifestyle for Christians means ANTICIPATING COMING JUDGMENT. (II. A. REJECTING... B. ANTICIPATING COMING JUDGMENT) **“...but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”** Unbelievers will one day be judged by a sovereign and holy God.

There are two kinds of judgment that human beings will face. True believers in the God of the Bible will face a judgment in which rewards will be given according to faithfulness and obedience demonstrated toward the God who is there. This will not involve condemnation or punishment. It is a judgment of rewards.

On the other hand, unbelievers will face a judgment of condemnation and punishment. The severity of their eternal punishment will vary according to the evil deeds that they have done. The realization that these non-Christian persecutors will spend eternity being punished for their sins should motivate Christians not to yield to the pressure from the persecutors. Instead we should be motivated to turn from a sinful lifestyle and live for the will of God.

C.

Turning from a sinful lifestyle also means LOOKING FORWARD TO THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD. Verse 6 reads, **“For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”**

Verse 6 has been subject to several different interpretations. Some have suggested that it teaches that unbelievers have a second chance after they die to be saved eternally. But this would go against many statements in the Bible.

Others believe that Peter is saying that the gospel has been preached to those who are spiritually dead. But the reference that he just made to the dead in v. 5 is clearly referring to the physically dead, not to the spiritually dead. So the context would seem to go against that idea.

It seems best to me to understand that Peter is talking about Christians who are now dead and are with the Lord. The preaching of the gospel and their acceptance of it were made by them when they were alive. Now they are dead. Yet still they are judged--- present tense verb--- in the flesh--- that is, in their earthly life as men. When Christians die, unbelievers look at that and say, “What good is your Christianity when you Christians die like everyone else. What a waste! Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you shall die.”

Peter’s response is: “Your judgment is limited. It is limited to the flesh. The gospel has not proven to be useless. These Christians who have died will rise again.” I take it that Peter is referring to the resurrection of the body. Back in v. 18 of #3 that same terminology was used in reference to the resurrection of Christ.

There was a Jewish book written in the late first century BC called “Wisdom of Solomon” that expressed a similar sentiment. Perhaps Peter was familiar with it. It speaks about the hope of a godly Jew. It reads,

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.” (3:1-4)

Because we Christians have this hope of immortality, and because we have this promise of resurrection from the dead, we ought to turn from a sinful lifestyle. How should we respond to suffering in the midst of the cosmic conflict between good and evil? We must choose to live for the will of God and turn from a sinful lifestyle. We trust that God through the Holy Spirit will give us the strength to do that.

One of my favorite movies is “The Battle of Gettysburg.” It is an accurate portrayal of perhaps the most crucial battle of the Civil War. One of the incidents that it portrays is a fight that occurred on the second day of this three day battle in 1863. Years ago I visited the battlefield and took particular note of the setting for this incident.

The Union Army controlled a low ridge (CEMETERY RIDGE) of hills outside of the Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. The Confederate Army tried to force the northerners off of it. On the second day of the battle the Confederates discovered that a hill at the south end of the ridge, called Little Round Top (CEMETERY RIDGE 2), was unoccupied. The Southerners prepared to take it so that they could put their cannons on it and inflict major damage on the Union line. They also could use it as a base to send troops out to roll up the Union flank. (LITTLE ROUND TOP)

At about the same time, a Union general realized that this flank was exposed, and he saw to it that an army brigade was quickly sent to protect it. At the very end of the line was the Twentieth Maine regiment, commanded by Colonel Joshua Chamberlain. (JOSHUA CHAMBERLAIN)

Colonel Chamberlain had never been in battle before. He had just been appointed colonel shortly before the battle. A few months earlier he had been a professor of rhetoric and modern languages at Bowdoin College. Now his actions in this most crucial battle of the war would affect the outcome of the fighting.

(BATTLE OF LITTLE ROUND TOP) For two hours his regiment held off repeated assaults up the wooded hill by parts of several Confederate regiments. The pressure was great. It was July. The weather was hot. The noise was deafening. The fighting was intense. Dying men were strewn about on the hill. (BATTLE OF LITTLE ROUND TOP 2) By late in the afternoon more than a third of Chamberlain’s men were dead or

wounded. The rest were running out of ammunition, and the Confederates were preparing a final assault up the hill.

In the face of such difficult circumstances who could have blamed Colonel Chamberlain if he had ordered his men to retreat? Who could have blamed him if he had surrendered to a much larger enemy force and saved the lives of his remaining men? But to do so could have adversely affected the course of the battle and of the war. His orders were to hold the high ground at all costs.

Colonel Chamberlain knew that it was his duty not to give in to temptation, and he gave up any concerns for his own well-being. He held the high ground, and he would not yield. His troops had pretty much run out of ammunition. The situation was desperate. In a flash of inspiration he ordered his men to fix their bayonets and to join him in a charge down the hill against the enemy. (UNION CHARGE)

The weary Confederates were so shocked by this attack that scores of them surrendered to the men from Maine. The rest were chased off of the hill. Colonel Chamberlain and his men won the fight and saved the day because of their bravery and refusal to give up the high ground. For his heroism Chamberlain was later awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Bible tells us that we are involved in a spiritual war that is every bit as real as the Civil War. Satan and his forces would like for nothing better than to wipe us out. The battlefields of this war involve private agonies and public persecutions. They involve marriages and other personal relationships and addictions and illnesses and financial struggles and temptations involving guilt and pride and anger and depression.

We must not yield to temptation on these battlefields. For we hold the high ground. We should not surrender the high ground. God's side will ultimately win. But we want to be full participants in that victory. To do that we must determine to live for the will of God and turn from a sinful lifestyle by depending upon the Holy Spirit in the midst of suffering.