



## **An Easter Catechesis : The Lessons of 1 Peter**

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The human spirit has endured all kinds of repression and insult and has survived by means of grim humor, faith, revolution, exile, sorrow, and courage. In East Germany the economy requires hard Western currency, but the citizens must pay exorbitant premiums to obtain those funds before they are permitted to purchase many restricted items. “Is it possible for a male to bear children?” one East German asks. “Normally not,” answers another, “but for West German marks, anything is possible!” In Namibia, a black pastor travels by car among thirty or more congregations. He is stopped at gunpoint first by the government troops patrolling for subversives and then by the revolutionary forces. Searched and interrogated, he knows that a misspoken word, an arbitrary order from a nervous sergeant, or a perceived threat from some other origin could cost him his life. And countless others—the invisible poor, the dispossessed, the sorrowful, those oppressed by an ominous future—may lead lives of quiet desperation.

How is it possible to live with courage and hope within societal structures over which we have little or no control? What is the ground of hope from which Christians may be encouraged when our situation has become oppressive and our very faith has been demeaned? What is the measure of the integrity of our relationships with one another and within the larger structures of family, work, and citizenship? How does the identification of the believer with the Christ who was crucified and raised bestow an identity and confidence which no unjust reproach may dislodge?

In the second through the seventh Sundays of Easter, readings from 1 Peter are appointed for the Second Lesson. The continuity of these passages provides a distinctive opportunity for pastoral instruction, encouragement, and proclamation. The Easter season is particularly appropriate for 1 Peter because of the clear evangelical testimony of the epistle, which constantly turns our attention to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the ground and goal of Chris-

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\*This essay is based on a discussion in which the following participated: Paul Berge (who provided the exegetical introduction), Marc Kolden, Daniel Simundson, Walter Sundberg, and David Tiede. W. Sundberg is a pastor at Como Park Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. The other participants are members of the faculty of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

tian hope. Ancient and modern interpreters have discovered 1 Peter to be a jewel of exceptional clarity in its articulation of the gospel. Martin Luther, who ranked it as among “the true and noblest books of the New Testament,” also drew directly upon its phrases in catechetical instruction.

If it is appropriate to read 1 Peter as an Easter catechesis, it must be seen as a catechesis of the faithful. This is not a course for inquirers or a comprehensive exposition of the faith for prospective members. But this book may well be commended for pastoral instruction of those who have heard the proclamation of Lent and Easter Sunday. Now they are ready to explore the consequent Christian life as calling into the world as well as hope of the world to come. Thus an extended course in adult instruction or a series of sermons on “The Easter Faith and the People of God” could be productive ways to bring the message of 1 Peter to life within the ministry of the congregation. This could be an opportunity to present a complete biblical book, to challenge and comfort the faithful with a rich vision of the vocation of the people of God, and to increase awareness of the grave difficulty which many sisters and brothers still endure for the sake of the Christian faith.

Before moving into a discussion of specific features of the assigned texts, a few more general observations may be helpful. For those who will adopt the text of 1 Peter as a keynote for the Easter season, careful consideration will need to be given to how its message best addresses the congregation in its context. Advance and repeated reading of 1 Peter, combined with a disciplined assessment of the identity and mission of the congregation, would be essential for equipping the pastoral interpreter in discerning the claims and assurances which this book announces. And for the Spirit’s guidance for the pastor and the people in exploring the consequences of the cross and resurrection, the collect appointed for the Fifth Sunday of Easter may well serve as a guide:

O God, form the minds of your faithful people into a single will. Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The following specifics should also be observed:

1. *The whole of 1 Peter should be read and studied in its own sequence.* A review of the lessons appointed for these Sundays will reveal that the pericopes are generally in sequence, except for the reading appointed for the fifth Sunday, and that a good portion of the book is covered by these readings (see chart below). Attention to literary context is always a primary consideration in interpretation, but the importance of tending to the larger context is all the more obvious when the selections are derived from all of the major divisions of the book. The message of 1 Peter also depends upon the interior logic of the whole so that even the “theo-logic” may be misrepresented if the relation of the parts to the whole is not carefully assessed. In particular, the ethical exhortations of 1 Peter may be misunderstood as mere demands if their evangelical foundation is not clearly established. Thus each of the appointed passages may be located within its major section, and it can be seen that the lectionary also moves from proclamation to exhortation, from the indicative to the imperative.

- 1 Peter 1:17-21      The Third Sunday of Easter  
 1 Peter 2:4-10      (The Fifth Sunday of Easter)  
 II. Good Conscience and Faithful Witness under Trial: 1 Peter 2:11-3:22  
 1 Peter 2:19-25      The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
 1 Peter 3:15-22      The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
 III. The Fiery Ordeal and the Hope of Glory: 1 Peter 4:1-5:14  
 1 Peter 4:12-17, 5:6-11      The Seventh Sunday of Easter

2. *The internal structure of the passages must be carefully observed as a clue to the point that is being scored.* This author has a remarkable sense for making a point within a point, and he draws upon the Scriptures of Israel and early Christian creedal and hymnic memory pieces to warrant his point and to sound. critical themes. The first major section of the book provides especially rich examples of this method, since it includes four smaller segments, and each of these is structured in parallel fashion.

|                              | I       | II      | III     | IV     |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| Imperative                   | 1:13    | 1:17    | 1:22    | 2:1    |
| Identification of the people | 1:14-15 | 1:18-19 | 1:23    | 2:2-4  |
| Traditional Declaration      | 1:16    | 1:20-21 | 1:24-25 | 2:6-10 |
| Conclusion                   | 1:16    | 1:21    | 1:25b   | 2:9-10 |

Each commences with an imperative (1:13, 17, 22; 2:1). A statement of identification of the community follows (1:14-15, 18-19, 23; 2:2-4), marked in three instances by an explicit contrast of *not* this *but* this (1:14-15, 18-19, 23; see also 2:9). Then a clear declaration is given in traditional or scriptural phrases. (For 1:16, see Lev 11:44, 45. For 1:20-21, observe the appositive and relative clauses which indicate the citation of creedal, hymnic or memory pieces: “Christ, who was destined before the foundation of the world” and “God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory.” For 1:24-25, see Isa 40:6-8. For 2:6-10, see Isa 28:16, Ps 118:22, Isa 8:14, and a rich mixture of other scriptural allusions in the titles in 2:9-10.) The conclusion of the segment may be also couched in these traditional phrases or in the author’s own words (1:16, 21, 25b; 2:9-10).

Investing some time and care in these details will not only increase respect for the author’s thorough and elegant presentation of the message, but it will also contribute to a grasp of the kind of repeated framework and message which is part and parcel of the assurance which 1 Peter conveys. Good commentaries will also provide continual assistance in recognizing the structured character of 1 Peter. The author assures us once, then again, and again, and again concerning the foundation of Christian hope; and each of these little segments accumulates to confirm that this message is truly grounded outside of us. The structure is actually an indirect clue to the gospel which this book proclaims.

3. *Exercise some caution in the literal usage of the Revised Standard Version.* The RSV remains the standard for English versions, and it will serve well as the lectionary and study Bible for 1 Peter. But once the interpreter recognizes that 1 Peter is not simply a collection of

moralisms or commands to individuals to conform, the level of discomfort with certain translation issues rises as the evan-

gelical substance of the book is taken seriously. Thus, for example, the English word “you” is likely to be heard individualistically, but the careful English reader will quickly perceive that this is a word for a people and will note the plural character of the “you” who are addressed. The Greek text of 1 Peter is replete with second person plural forms.

So also, other less evident translation problems may assume greater importance as the reading of the book becomes a quest for its clear statement of the gospel. In 2:24b the RSV reads “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness,” but the phrase should be more precisely translated “that we *having died to sin* might live to righteousness.” In 2:25 the RSV continues, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls,” but the Greek text indicates that “you *have been returned,*” so that the image of rescue is more appropriate than any concept of human achievement. Again, the RSV reading of 5:6, “Humble yourselves,” is more precisely a passive imperative, “be humbled” or “be made humble.” All of which is merely to underscore the objective assurance of 1 Peter as being even more forceful than a casual reader might first observe.

4. *Remember the pastoral realism which characterizes 1 Peter.* Although we wish that we knew a great deal more about the specific situation for which 1 Peter was written, both the evangelical clarity and the practicality of the letter indicate that it is down to earth and written for real people facing real crises. Without being certain exactly which persecution was impending, we can still recognize that this book conveys vital assurance and counsel for people who are regarded with suspicion or disdain within their own society. Is it true that Christians are “enemies of the Roman order”? In contrast to the Revelation to John, where the options have become much more extreme, the message of 1 Peter is not yet that of disassociation from the world. It is still possible to live responsibly within the social order and to bear a faithful witness while at one’s station of life. Thoughtful Christians who are concerned about the place of their Easter faith in the complexities of a disinterested or angry world may derive rich benefit from the catechesis of 1 Peter.

## I. THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN HOPE: 1 PETER 1:1-2:10

Three of the appointed Easter lessons derive from this section of 1 Peter. The entire discussion is grounded in the sure and certain faithfulness of God which has been confirmed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For all those believers, past and present, whose worth has been questioned, whose faith has been demeaned or whose future has been threatened, the resurrection of Christ is proclaimed as the ground and goal of Christian identity, confidence, and hope. The assurance is thoroughly Christological and theocentric: “Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1:21).

The author of 1 Peter instructs us in the exposition of Easter, paying particular attention to the consequences of the resurrection of Jesus for our present

lives. Too often, Jesus' death and resurrection are interpreted strictly with reference to our hope for the world to come, but what if hope seems to be a rare commodity here and now? This opening section of 1 Peter directs us even to developing evangelical fibre in our morality. Claiming nothing on the basis of our own virtue, we are invited to claim the confidence and courage which is bestowed by God. In the resurrection of Jesus, a new vision of life and human dignity and a new hope that will not fail have been revealed. There is nothing naive or whimsical about this vision or this hope. Neither is of our own making. Both are anchored in the resurrection which has already been accomplished and are expectant of Christ's promised return. For 1 Peter, Christian hope is hardheaded realism, characterized by ethical discipline: "Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13).

1 Peter 1:3-9 (The Second Sunday of Easter) sets the tone with the benediction or blessing of God introducing the boldly stated assurance of faith. The worship of Israel and the church surrounds and undergirds the encouragement which is offered, and the objective character of this hope is strongly affirmed.

Those who may regard themselves as "exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1) do not need to be told that they must now try harder in order to make their faith come true. These opening words may even sound oppressive to those believers who think that being "born anew" is a product of religious zeal, that a "living hope" is a personal optimism, and that the "genuineness of your faith" is merely a matter of sincerity (see 1:3 and 7). No, this entire passage is a straightforward declaration to those who have already been "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1:2).

The new birth of Christian baptism has already taken place. The living hope which is bestowed is the gift of God for those who have been incorporated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is no vague human yearning or valiant wish. This is a benefit of God's mercy through baptism which is as secure now as is the "inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" which awaits in heaven (1:4). So also, "the genuineness of your faith" is much more than personal quality. It is a description of the truth of the Christian faith which will not fail when the trusted idols have been destroyed in the purging fires of crisis.

So far, 1 Peter is only a statement of assurance, without appeals for action or fidelity. Those appeals will come, but it is fundamental to note that even an awareness "that you may have to suffer various trials" and that the faith may be "tested by fire" will not allow the ground of assurance to be displaced. What God has done in Christ is the source of hope and encouragement as times of trial approach.

1 Peter 1:17-21 (The Third Sunday of Easter) corresponds directly to the second structured segment identified above. The imperative to "conduct yourselves with fear" certainly does not imply terror or undue submissiveness, but as 1:17 implies and 2:17 states, this fear, love, and trust of God are the crucial signs of the dignity and independence of Christian allegiance. As Gerhard Krodel has observed in 2:17, "the quotation from Prov. 24:21, 'Fear the Lord *and*

*the king*' is changed into 'fear God, honor the king.' Christians do not fear their temporary masters precisely because they fear God."<sup>1</sup>

The mention of exile (1:17) again indicates that the powerful assurances which are given are not mere religious rhetoric. This is a message of hope precisely for those who find themselves treated as aliens in their own country or who must take a physical or spiritual departure from their homeland. People of faith may suddenly be regarded as threats or subversives. Their very identity and worth in the society may be subject to suspicion or hostility or derision. Then the declaration of God's initiative in Christ "destined before the foundation of the world" makes clear the secure basis for "confidence in God" and "faith and hope in God" (1:20-21).

The ethical imperative has now been introduced, but the hope of those who are regarded as aliens does not rest on their scrupulous perfection. Being prudent when they are under scrutiny is appropriate and wise, and Christians may do so with integrity because they are, after all, followers of the holy God "who judges each one impartially." But they are not watching every step as if their very lives depended on such unblemished performances. Theirs is a bolder confidence anchored in the unblemished Lamb, to whom the scriptures and creeds bear witness (1:19-20).

1 Peter 2:4-10 (The Fifth Sunday of Easter) is an extended play on the word "stone," and again the text resounds with objective, evangelical assurance. The stone rejected by humanity is chosen and precious to God, and those joined with Christ are also chosen and built into a structure of living stones. So also Christ was a stone of stumbling to those who in their disobedience were destined to reject him. Continuing rejection is thus no great surprise. It may even be a strange sign of what it means to be chosen of God.

Something of the depth of the anguish of alienation again begins to emerge in these verses. Ultimate salvation is not so much in question, but the distress of being a despised or barely tolerated minority is thinly disguised. Spending some time sorting out how this might have felt will not only give context to the understanding of 1 Peter, but it may also be a kind of bridge to discovering the situations and occasions in which the Christian faith still encounters similar reception. Perhaps those believers who have felt some public embarrassment (or even shame) with regard to their faith or themselves as Christians may find this testimony surprisingly refreshing.

Christ, the rock of faith as attested again by the Scriptures, is thus the cornerstone of anew edifice, a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9). The identity of this people has been assured against all of their detractors, and the section ends on a ringing declaration of the faithful as "God's people" who have now "received mercy." No one may take that identity away since it is a gift of God. But it is also a vocation and a commission. The identity of the people of God is assured, but it is

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<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Krodel, "The First Letter of Peter," *Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, Revelation* by Reginald H. Fuller, G. S. Sloyan, G. Krodel, F. W. Danker, and E. Schüssler Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 74.

finally not self-congratulatory. The purpose of this election is clearly articulated in terms that

redound to the glory of God. The declaration of “the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness” is already identified as the sign that this Foundation of Christian Hope is not a static stone. It is a calling into the world as well as a source of courage for living in the world.

## II. GOOD CONSCIENCE AND FAITHFUL WITNESS UNDER TRIAL: 1 PETER 2:11-3:22

1 Peter 2:19-25 (The Fourth Sunday of Easter) brings us down to cases, and the problems faced in this section are shocking in their realism. Pastors who are aware of the structures of power which often oppress the helpless will quickly recognize that these verses deal with circumstances in which people are often humiliated and degraded. Read casually, this whole section may appear to be a form of the bad counsel that abused people (subjects, 2:13-17; servants, 2:18-25; and wives, 3:1-6) should simply accept violence as if they deserved it. Even reading the lectionary without further explanation or proclamation could reinforce such dangerous notions. But this is rather a message of worth and encouragement for people who might otherwise only feel bad about themselves.

The central clue is again Christological, for Jesus Christ who also suffered and was subject to all is the same one who has now been exalted as Lord of heaven and earth with “angels, authorities, and powers subject to him” (3:22). It is crucial to note that Jesus and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 behind him are examples of those who have endured such reviling without just cause, and thus 1 Peter is in no way suggesting that people provoke attacks as if suffering itself were redemptive. Nor does this letter advocate mere quietism or denial of cruel violence, which has been one of the legacies of shame of clergy and other people of authority who have been afraid to confront such evils even when something could be done.

But this is written for a situation in which citizens, servants, and wives are in fact enduring hostility and even abuse for their faith. This is a clarion call of dignity and divinely assured worth for those who may be tempted to accept the accusation that they are dirt. These believers are actually much more in control than they might first realize, for they know the truth that has been revealed in Christ Jesus, and they even regard their apparently humiliating circumstances as opportunities to bear witness to the grace of God which holds and sustains them. No one can take this mercy, this integrity, or this mission from them, for they have already “been returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” (2:25).

1 Peter 3:15-22 (The Sixth Sunday of Easter) pursues this same Christologic one step further, tying the assurance of the letter back to the suffering and exalted Jesus, linked to the believer in baptism. Because of the instruction concerning the work of Christ which has already been conveyed, a new assurance of integrity, a courage in the face of blows, and even a bold evangelistic strategy are possible. 3:14b-15a may sound the keynote for the passage: “Have no fear of them nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord.”

Every child of God may rightly claim that God made me, and God does not make junk. But those who have been baptized into the death of Christ have a

particular claim to a “good conscience” no matter what they may have endured from an abusive, angry world. Thus in 3:16 and 21, 1 Peter is not so much discussing the importance of maintaining moral purity, although it does make a difference why people are abused and humiliated. But this is an invitation for the sufferers to look beyond themselves. They need not

justify their existence or attempt the improbable task of proving that they have always been above reproach in every way. But they can appeal to God for a good conscience, “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21), and this good conscience may thus be displayed to all the world as a confidence, a blessing which has been given by God, not merely as a personal attribute or performance. In this way through their gentleness and reverence and courageous good behavior, Christians may even put their accusers to shame.

The baptized have been washed and forgiven. This catechesis now reaches into the arena which seems to be farthest removed from the joy of Easter and claims it through the resurrection of the suffering one. These believers are not going to be saved by taking their blows. They are already saved by Christ, and they know it. But neither are they to be diminished by suffering. No oppressive government, no abusive employer, parent, or spouse, no political or religious fear-monger may besmirch or demean them unrighteously, especially for their faith. These believers are not only instructed in their identity as secured for them by Christ, but they are also challenged as people with a commission. They are not to be taken lightly. Their Lord who is now master of heaven and earth (3:22) has already endured such humiliation and been vindicated, and even their suffering may be an occasion to bear witness to this truth and the freedom it entails.

### III. THE FIERY ORDEAL AND THE HOPE OF GLORY: 1 PETER 4:1-5:14

1 Peter 4:12-17 and 5:6-11 continue the concerns of the previous lessons but with a new intensity. It may be that a new situation has emerged after 4:12 or that another source has been taken up.<sup>2</sup> At least now the “testing by fire,” which has been discussed since 1:7, has become “the fiery ordeal” with a great deal more apocalyptic specificity. This appointed lesson also underscores such a heightened awareness with the poignant warning: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you” (4:12).

The first portion of this lesson is structured primarily around a series of “reality conditions,” which are translated as “if” clauses in 4:14, 16, 17, and 18. But these should not be read as hypothetical notions such as “if ever you are reproached” etc. These are rather descriptions of the experience of the community: “since you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed” (4:14), “since it is as a Christian that one suffers, do not be ashamed” (4:16), “since it begins with us” (4:17), and “since the righteous one is scarcely saved” (4:18). The catechesis is even more concrete and practical in its pastoral counsel than first imagined. Consequently, the identification with Christ’s suffering and

<sup>2</sup>Cf. G. Krodel, “The First Letter of Peter,” 61-65.

glory which introduces these conditions (4: 13) is also a lively word of encouragement and no mere platitude.

Throughout the book a hard-headed confidence in the Lordship of Christ constantly undergirds the words of encouragement. The evangelistic strategy of faithful witness in the face of oppression is not merely a general theory of nonviolent resistance, although it is similar to such a view in many ways. These Christians are looking in the face of a very hostile Roman world in which they are thought to be enemies and atheists and subversives, and they are continuing in the way of the Lord Jesus not only because the method may be effective. But they



are confident that the suffering Jesus is indeed the exalted Lord of heaven and earth who ultimately stands behind the forces of history, no matter how oppressive and evil and apparently almighty they may be.

The apocalyptic assurances of 1 Peter 5:6-11 are thus an expression of this ultimate hope. Notice the agency of the verbs. It is God who will exalt the humble, and who after a brief interim of human suffering will restore, strengthen, and establish the faithful. The present realities of suffering and humiliation will not endure forever. The shame of being suspected by neighbors and fellow citizens as an enemy of the Roman order will finally be overcome. God who has already done this very thing in vindicating the Lord Jesus and exalting him over all his accusers will continue this mercy “in due time” on behalf of those who believe in Christ.

The catechesis of 1 Peter may prove to be most appropriate for those Christians who are facing real and immediate suffering for their faith. The “reality conditions” of this final pericope certainly address such situations most directly. Perhaps others in more comfortable circumstances may need to ponder these conditional phrases as more general statements, e.g., “whenever you are reproached for the name of Christ,” etc. But even they should be able to derive a deeper understanding of the assurance of the gospel from grasping that the confidence of 1 Peter is not hypothetical. This message also shatters all triumphalistic notions that success and wealth are clear signs of election, since it is in the midst of and because of their suffering that these Christians are assured of God’s continuing favor. And all readers are well advised to note the prophetic warning: “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal...as though something strange were happening to you.” A crucial part of the instruction of the faithful is the truth that naive optimism is not Christian.

Nevertheless, the identification of the foundation of Christian hope, the assurance of good conscience and faithful witness under trial, and even the announcement of the fiery ordeal and the hope of glory are all filled with an evangelical confidence. The catechesis of 1 Peter is truly an exposition of the gospel of Good Friday and Easter. This is a tested word of encouragement and renewed vocation for the people of God no matter how trying the times may be.

## RESOURCES

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