



Crass Casualty or Purposeful Pain? Psalm 34's Influence on Peter's First Letter

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Late in the nineteenth century, poet and novelist Thomas Hardy published “Hap” (1898), a frightening meditation on the sorrows, pain, and affliction that are such a universal and inescapable part of the human experience. He concluded, rather grimly, that the hardships we face and the tears we shed are ultimately random and meaningless. This was a recurring theme in Hardy’s later work, in which he “explores the bitter ironies of life with sometimes an almost malevolent staging of coincidence to emphasize the disparity between human desire and ambition on the one hand and what fate has in store for the characters on the other.” The poem “Hap,” a work that shows Hardy “in the characteristic mood of complaining about the irony of human destiny in a universe ruled by chance,”¹ clearly fits this description.

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: “Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!”

¹Introductory notes on Thomas Hardy, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 2001) 2290.

Whereas Thomas Hardy’s poem “Hap” concludes that human sorrows have no purpose, the author of Ps 34 finds the kindness of God in the midst of crisis. First Peter uses Ps 34 in its attempt to convince Christian readers that suffering is purposeful.

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.²

It would be better, the poet suggests, to be the victim of a strong, vindictive, cruel god who could be hated as the cause of endless sorrow, “half-eased” in knowing there was someone to blame. But the reality is far different—there is no one to blame. Joy and sorrow, hope and fear are all the product of “Crass Casualty,” Happenstance, Chance.

Compared to this bleak perspective the Scriptures stand in sharp contrast, and it is instructive to compare Hardy’s writing with a biblical poem that reflects a very different worldview. Psalm 34 proposes that hope and peace may be found in the midst of affliction, a theme that appears to have shaped Peter’s first letter. In this letter we read the concerns of a pastor wanting to help the communities addressed, though he is physically far from them.³ Ostracized because of their belief in Jesus and facing the very real possibility of physical harm, it would have been easy for these beleaguered Christians to despair, perhaps questioning their belief (or at least trust) in the existence of a good and merciful God. It would be far easier to accept the simplistic sequence of logic that would reason that *if* God is good, my life should be free of pain; *since* my life is not free of pain, God is not good or maybe doesn’t exist at all. Peter’s letter cuts through such erroneous thinking and not only reaffirms that God is good, but goes a long way toward explaining that suffering has purpose.

To do this, Peter turned to his Bible. First Peter is rich in quotations of and allusions to the Jewish Scriptures, but in this paper I would like to focus on his use of Ps 34 (33 in the LXX). Donald P. Senior and Daniel J. Harrington observe that Peter seems to have had “a particular affinity for its theme of God’s help in distress,” quoting it in 2:3 and 3:10–12. In an earlier study, J. N. D. Kelly notes that the author’s allusion to Ps 34:8 in 1 Pet 2:3 “is not haphazard; the whole psalm was present in his mind as he wrote the letter, and must have been familiar to his readers.”⁴ Taking these observations as a starting point, I would like to highlight a few

²Taken from *The Norton Anthology*, 2291.

³First Peter is a circular letter, addressed to several churches in Asia Minor, modern Turkey (1:1). Traditionally, it is argued that Peter wrote this letter from Rome (see 5:13) in the 60s C.E. That this traditional view of authorship is often questioned is immaterial for our purposes here. For convenience, the writer will be referred to as Peter, though no judgment about authorship is implied.

⁴Donald P. Senior and Daniel J. Harrington, *1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003) 49; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1969) 87.

characteristics of Peter's sermon that were shaped in part by Ps 34, a poem concerned with God's help in distress. But before doing so, we will consider the trying circumstances in which these readers were living out their Christian lives.

COMMUNITIES IN CRISIS

Thanks to the letter-writing habits of an obsequious Roman official, we catch a brief glimpse of the plight facing Peter's first readers. Pliny the Younger (61–114 C.E.) became governor of Bithynia during the reign of the Emperor Trajan. He is of interest to historians of early Christianity because of his correspondence with Trajan in which he asks for advice on how to deal with those called Christians.

It is my custom, lord emperor, to refer to you all questions whereof I am in doubt. Who can better guide me when I am at a stand, or enlighten me if I am in ignorance? In investigations of Christians I have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated, or what allowances are made.⁵

He continues in the most dispassionate tone, describing his usual procedure of asking those accused of being Christian whether the charge was true. When this was the case, he repeated the question a second and third time, accompanied with threats of punishment. For those who persisted in their confession of this faith, Pliny explains to Trajan, "I ordered them for execution...[because] obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished." What Pliny was not clear on was whether procedures should be different depending on the offender's age, or if they repented and "worshipped your [i.e., Trajan's] statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ." Trajan's strictly pragmatic reply is equally devoid of emotion: "You have adopted the proper course, my dear Secundus," agreeing with his governor that convicted Christians "must be punished." The emperor also has a clear respect for due process and adds that those who deny being Christian, or who are accused of being such by unsigned papers, should not be punished. Pliny's letter not only provides a sense of the systemic response to Christians early in the second century, but also valuable insights into the activities of house churches at this early stage of the church's history (ca. 112 C.E.).

Pliny was governor of Bithynia, one of the Roman provinces to which 1 Peter was addressed (1:1). Whether and to what extent this reference to the plight of Christians in the area is relevant for the interpretation of 1 Peter is debated. Some date the epistle to the 60s of the first century, assuming 1 Peter was written by the apostle himself. Since Peter was executed during the reign of the Emperor Nero, this would mean a date of composition prior to 68 C.E. when Nero committed suicide.⁶

⁵Pliny's letter to Trajan and the Emperor's reply are taken from *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, ed. J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1987) 18–21.

⁶For this view, see, e.g., Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) 1–3. Hillyer suggests Peter wrote his first letter "about A.D. 63" (3). A key passage for Hillyer is 1 Pet 2:13–14 with its exhortation to good citizenship, an injunction that would be unlikely—in his estimate—after Nero's attack on Christians in 64 C.E.

Others question the Petrine authorship of 1 Peter and entertain later dates of composition.⁷

"I ordered [Christians] for execution...[because] obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished"

Either way, I would suggest that Pliny's correspondence is useful for providing a sense of how pagan neighbors reacted to Christian communities in the area, regardless of the time of writing. One of Pliny's concerns had to do with the appropriate course to take when accusations were brought to him by non-Christians. Allowing that some of the charges were motivated by other interests than mere loyalty to the state or religious concern—Trajan seems to have anticipated such an abuse of the system by rejecting unsigned charges—there was an obvious dislike of Christians and their practices. Pliny described the spread of Christianity as a “contagion” and regretted that this “superstition has penetrated not the cities only, but the villages and country.” Such rejection corresponds with the scene described by Peter:

...now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials (1:6)

...[you are] aliens and exiles (2:11)

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds (2:11)

...if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval (2:20)

...do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you (4:12)

...if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name (4:16)

...let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good (4:19)

Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour (5:8)

...your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering (5:9)

What can a pastor (writing from a distance) say to congregations facing such treatment by their neighbors and the governing authorities? As noted, Peter turned to Ps 34 for inspiration, a poem that speaks of God's faithfulness to “those who fear him”

⁷For this view, see, e.g., John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), who argues for a date of composition between 73 and 92 C.E. (134–138). See also Senior and Harrington, *1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter*, 7–10, who also suggest a date after 70 C.E. Of course the later one dates the letter the more relevant Pliny's correspondence becomes.

(34:7; cf. vv. 9, 11). Yes, those who fear him will experience pain, but there can be peace in the midst of it. It would appear that this psalm influenced Peter's sermon, perhaps in ways well beyond a direct citation (3:10–12 = Ps 34:12–16) and explicit allusion (1 Pet 2:3 = Ps 34:8).

PETER PREACHES PSALM 34

According to Peter, suffering is a meaningful and even necessary part of the Christian life; it is not arbitrary, like the random course of events described by Thomas Hardy. We find in his letter an attempt to provide readers with a new perspective on their present unpleasant situation. To paraphrase Peter's message to them: Suffering is a normal consequence of the Christian life. It is pervasive (1:6), temporary (1:6), purposeful (1:7), unjust when coming from non-believers (3:16), and not particularly remarkable, so “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place...as though something strange were happening to you” (4:12). Positively, out of trials a believer's faith is proved to be genuine (1:6; 4:12) and the experience of suffering involves identification with Christ's passion (4:1). Peter is here breathing the air of Ps 34 (see the table at the end of this paper). I will highlight two points in particular.

“What makes Peter's story meaningful to harassed Christians—then and now—is his fallibility. He understood fear.”

THE PASTOR IDENTIFIES WITH THE CONGREGATION

First, the psalmist and Peter identify with their audiences (“let us exalt his name together” [Ps 34:3; cf. 1 Pet 1:3]). To speak truly comforting words to those in distress there needs to be empathy. When speaking about temptation, C. S. Lewis once remarked that he would “not indulge in futile philippics against enemies [he] never met in battle.”⁸ His point was that individuals who have not wrestled with particular sins have no right to look down on others who have. (For instance, some of us may not be seriously tempted to cheat on our taxes, whereas others are.) There is an important lesson here. Would-be preachers who are unable to empathize with their congregation may not be heard. If twenty-first-century North American Christians were to preach endurance in the face of persecution to believers in, say, China or Sudan, their words would ring hollow since they have never faced anything similar. The same would have been true of Peter's letter had he not encountered similar challenges to those faced by his readers.

What makes Peter's story meaningful to harassed Christians—then and now—is his fallibility. He understood fear (Matt 26:57–58, 69–75; Mark 14:53–54, 66–72; Luke 22:54–62). Indeed, if the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (late second century) builds on any historical realities we might surmise that Peter struggled with fear in

⁸C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1955) 84.

the face of danger throughout his life. As the story goes, when he was encouraged to flee Rome to preserve his life, the disguised Peter met Jesus entering the city of Rome just as he himself was leaving:

[A]s he went out of the gate [Peter] saw the Lord entering Rome; and when he saw him he said, “Lord, whither (goest thou) here?” And the Lord said to him, “I am coming to Rome to be crucified.” And Peter said to him, “Lord, art thou being crucified again?” He said to him, “Yes, Peter, I am being crucified again.” And Peter came to himself; and he saw the Lord ascending into heaven; then he returned to Rome rejoicing and giving praise to the Lord, because he said, “I am being crucified”; (since) this was to happen to Peter. (*Acts of Peter* 35)⁹

At this point Peter finally faces his fears and accepts the frightening consequences of obedience to the Lord. With words recalling St. Paul, he explains to his friends, “[S]o long as the Lord wills me to be in the flesh, I do not demur; again, if he will take me, I rejoice and am glad” (36). Eventually, Peter was crucified, head down (36–40). Regardless of the historicity of this scene, we can be sure Peter was familiar with Jesus’ warning that his followers would be tested (e.g., Mark 8:34–37) and no doubt experienced rejection and threats on a number of occasions (consider, e.g., Acts 4:1–22). He is, as a result of such experiences, qualified to address those who understood what it meant to suffer for doing good (1 Pet 2:20; 3:17).

It is comforting—as much for twenty-first-century readers as for those in the first—to hear Peter identifying with his congregations: “Blessed be the God and Father of *our* Lord Jesus Christ!...he has given *us* a new birth into a living hope” (1:3, emphasis added). What is more, he kindly reminds these Christians of Asia Minor that other believers stand with them: “Your sister church in Babylon [=Rome], chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark” (5:13). You are not alone!

FINDING JOY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Psalm 34 and 1 Peter invite readers to experience the kindness of God (“taste and see” that he is good [Ps 34:8a = 1 Pet 2:3]). Further, they maintain that the experience of good things is possible for those who fear God (esp. Ps 34:12; 1 Pet 3:10). Set side by side with Hardy’s absent “vengeful god,” and his implied negation of the existence of any good god (how could there be one, given the sorrowful human condition?), the psalmist and Peter are heard sounding notes of optimism. Interestingly, there is common ground among those (a) addressed by the psalmist, among whose number were found the brokenhearted and those crushed in spirit (Ps 34:18), (b) Peter’s audience, who suffered unjustly (1 Pet 2:20), and (c) Hardy, for whom “joy lies slain.” The difference for the biblical writers is found in their insistence that believers remain (or should remain) obedient to God regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in.

⁹Taken from Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 2:314.

Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? Keep your tongue from evil....Depart from evil...seek peace. (Ps 34:12–14 = 1 Pet 3:10–11)

Suffering is purposeful for those who acknowledge the Lord's authority over their lives and who trust in his inherent goodness—despite circumstances that appear to suggest otherwise. Such disciples do not approach life with the assumption that they should be exempt from pain (see again 1 Pet 2:21). Rather, they resemble Daniel's friends who faced Nebuchadnezzar's fires, placing priority on obedience to God's laws over their longing for deliverance:

If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. (Dan 3:17–18)

Holding up such ideals regarding discipleship can be discouraging for those of us who are more inclined to lament like Hardy than sing hymns in the midst of fires, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (see Dan 2:24–90 [Catholic editions]¹⁰). Peter knew as well as anyone that Christians make mistakes—as his own story demonstrates—and so it is that we are constantly growing (1 Pet 2:2) and striving to follow Christ's own example of the proper response to sorrow and pain (2:21). Following his lead, we may learn to entrust ourselves “to the one who judges justly” (2:23).

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Like all good pastors, Peter turned to Scripture when ministering to the needs of his flock (to use his own term: “I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge” [5:1–2]). Psalm 34 was by no means the only text that shaped his sermon, but it certainly contributed meaningful material intended to comfort the congregations addressed. 

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¹⁰The Prayer of Azariah and The Song of the Three Jews is found between Dan 3:23 and 24 in the Septuagint and is included in the Apocrypha.

SHARED CONCERNS	PSALM 34	1 PETER
authors identify with readers (use of first person plural)	"let us exalt his name together" (v. 3)	"he has given us new birth into a living hope" (1:3; cf. 5:9, 13)
prayer for deliverance	"I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him..." (vv. 4–5; also 15, 17)	"Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you" (5:7)
God is protector	"The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them....happy are those who take refuge in him" (v. 7, 8b; cf. 18–20)	"[we] are being protected by the power of God" (1:5); "God...will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you" (5:10)
shared imagery	"taste and see that the LORD is good" (v. 8a)	"you have tasted that the Lord is good" (2:3)
appropriate fear of God	"fear the LORD, you his holy ones" (v. 9a; cf. vv. 9b, 11)	"Fear God" (2:17)
prayers are heard, God is aware	"The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry" (v. 15; cf. vv. 6, 17)	Ps 34:15 is cited in 3:12
justice will come; the evil will receive what is due them	"The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (v. 16)	God is a just judge (2:23) to whom the "living and the dead" will have to account (4:5–6)
the need for obedience	"Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers" (vv. 12–16a)	the Greek version of Ps 34:12–16a (= LXX 33:13–17a) is quoted in 1 Pet 3:10–12 with slight modification
justice will come	"The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (v. 16); "Evil brings death to the wicked" (v. 21)	"[the wicked] will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead" (4:5)
the faithful are in fellowship with God	"The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (v. 22)	"By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope...an inheritance that is imperishable" (1:3–4)