

Their Souls Did Magnify the Lord (2/5)

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Justo: Yesterday we spoke of a letter addressed to people who have experienced a new birth and who have been given a new inheritance and therefore a new status in life. As we saw, this is the reason why I Peter is such a joyful epistle.

But that is not the entire story. The Christians to whom this epistle was addressed had a new birth and a new inheritance. But still they had to go on living in a world that knew nothing of new births and new inheritances. We might think that their conversion made them more respectable, or more acceptable to their neighbors; but the opposite was usually the case. If a nobody suddenly begins acting like somebody, if someone who is destitute suddenly begins living with the joy and the assurance of someone who has an imperishable inheritance, people are going to notice. And their reaction will not normally be positive. “Who does she think she is, giving herself airs. You would think that she was the daughter of a king.” Or, if someone who has all kinds of reasons to complain about life suddenly starts living joyfully, and nothing apparently has changed, people will also start talking: “Is he crazy? I wonder what he has done. He looks like the cat who swallowed the canary.”

While Christians rejoiced in their new-found life, the world went on. And so, they end up feeling like exiles in the very society in which they grew up. This is why the Epistle addressed its readers as “exiles.” They are exiles, not only because they are not yet in heaven, but also and most

particularly because they no longer fit in the society in which they live.

That situation makes for trouble, and that is why, immediately after speaking of the joy of the new birth and the new inheritance, the Epistle goes on to say that “now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials” (1.6).

At the time when this epistle was written, such troubles were only beginning. The time had not yet arrived of the persecutions of the second century, when Christians all over the Empire would be under constant threat of death, or of the even worse persecutions of the third century, when Christians would be sought out by the authorities, and made to suffer all kinds of torture and cruel deaths if they would not abandon their faith. Yet, it was already a difficult time and in 5:9 the Epistle exhorts its readers to be “firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your fellowship throughout the world.”

While it is true that Christians were not generally being thrown to the lions, there were all sorts of pressures upon them. Slaves of unbelieving masters, and wives of unbelieving husbands, were particularly vulnerable—and to this we shall return in a couple of days. But in a society in which everything had religious overtones, those who rejected the common religious practices would in turn be rejected. The meat offered at the market has been sacrificed to idols, and buying and eating it is in a sense an act of worship to those idols. So, you can't go to the butcher-shop. Entertainment is also dedicated to the gods in a religious ceremony. So, you can't

participate in that. Civil servants have to join in the ceremonies of the state religion. So, you can't be a civil servant. Teachers have to teach the myths of the gods as told by the poets of old. Also, many of the actions attributed to those gods are quite immoral. So, you can't be a teacher. And on, and on, and on. No wonder that society at large rejected and despised these people who seemed to despise it!

What should Christians do? Should they give in, and participate in all these religious ceremonies? Should they quietly accept the mores of the time, in order to be more acceptable and avoid suffering and persecution? The answer of the Epistle is quite clear: certainly not! On the contrary, from their faith they must draw the strength to live as exiles, as faithful exiles who know that by virtue of a new birth they are a new people, and that by virtue of a new inheritance they are a royal people!

It is important to remember that the society in which these Christians declared themselves to be exiles was one of the highest and most civilized that the world had ever known. Indeed, one of the things to be most coveted at the time was the title of Roman citizenship. That was something to boast about, for it gave you all sorts of privileges, no matter where you traveled in the Empire. And yet, even in the midst of this society whose citizenship is so highly prized, the epistle tells Christians that they ought to find their identity, their joy and even their pride, not in being citizens, but in being exiles.

Catherine: This new faith at first could give its new adherents a sense of pride and joy. The question was, however, how would they withstand the pressures when they left the gathering of the faithful and went back to their homes and places of work. Would they still be faithful? We also know similar pressures in our own Christian lives. How often have we heard someone say that certain attitudes or ways of dealing with other people simply were unrealistic and didn't work in the business world, however nice they might be for life in the church! Loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, going the second mile—that is great advice for the church, or even among friends and family. But it certainly doesn't work on Wall Street, or at the Pentagon, or in the competition of sales. It's impractical and counterproductive.

The early church assumed that when one became a Christian, all of life had to be lived in this new way. One could not continue in the old life in some parts of one's life. If Christians are new people, then they are new people every day and in every relationship. They are not new on Sunday, and the same old people the rest of the week! Therefore, any tensions between their new life and that old one would be quite obvious.

I have a feeling they felt the tension more than we do, not only because they lived in a world that did not acknowledge the Christian faith, but perhaps even more because they assumed all of their lives would have to be lived in this new way. I think we bracket off parts of our lives and assume that, though of course we need to be generally ethical in our dealings, the specific teachings of the church, which go far beyond common human ethics, need not be considered in

these areas. What happens in business, in the economic and political life of the society, attitudes towards other nations—these are often viewed as arenas in which specifically Christian attitudes are not appropriate. There we should act in ways that are more “sensible” and “practical.” Christian ethics for us is often reduced to private morality, or life within the church, not life within the public world and the market place.

But the early church made no exceptions. The new birth was for a whole life, not certain parts of life. Therefore, these new Christians could anticipate being quite uncomfortable in the world in which they found themselves. How would they respond? Could they graciously and lovingly continue on their way? What effect would the tension and the possible suffering have upon them?

For Christians, it was a difficult question. If the heart of the Christian faith is love, then if suffering were actually endured, but it made them bitter and hostile, it was hardly a great gain. If they maintained their stated beliefs but ceased to be new creatures, what would they have gained? The problem was how to endure the suffering that might be demanded, and to allow the suffering to make them more Christian, more loving, more faithful—rather than less. Suffering does not always do that!

The Epistle deals with two kinds of suffering: the first is suffering that is deserved because of our own evil actions. In 2:20 we read the words: “For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and

are beaten for it you take it patiently?” and again in 4:15: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker.” Specifically, the state has the right to punish those who do wrong. Therefore, there is a suffering that results from our own wrong actions.

But there are also occasions when we do what is right, and precisely because of what we have done we are punished—even by the state. Perhaps the law was unjust—and we did what was just. Perhaps the officials were corrupt—and we did what was right. There is unjust suffering—sometimes even agreed to by the society and the state. Evil exists in this fallen world--and it often leads to the unjust suffering of the righteous.

In neither case here is the Epistle speaking of the suffering that comes from illness or accident. The author is considering the attacks on Christians because of their beliefs and actions. The attitude is summarized in 3:17: “It is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong.”

This does not mean that God sends suffering to us, but rather that we may find ourselves in situations where our choice is to behave as Christians and suffer the consequences or revert to our old lives, and avoid suffering. When that is the choice, the will of God for us is to suffer.

Justo: It must be clearly said that the early church did not push people to be martyrs. On the contrary, they were convinced that people who simply offered themselves up, because they wished to be martyrs, were unworthy of that title. They knew of what today we call “martyr’s complex,” people who are always looking for problems, so they can wallow in their suffering, feel sorry for themselves, and be secretly angry at everybody else. That certainly was not what they wished to foster. Suffering is bad, and it should be avoided.

But there are things that are worse than suffering. One of these, the early church said, and this Epistle confirms, is abandoning the faith in order to avoid suffering. Therefore, although one should not go about looking for problems or for trouble with the authorities, they said, when trouble comes Christians must not buy their way out of it at the cost of being unfaithful to their Lord and to their beliefs.

Furthermore, the Epistle says, when such suffering comes, it should be welcomed, not because it is pleasant or because it makes us feel good (as in the case of the “martyr’s complex”) but because it refines our faith. This is the basis for the image that Catherine and I took from the Epistle, and used for the title of our study-book: We are to rejoice, we are told in chapter 1, verses 6 and 7, even though for a little while we may have to suffer various trials, because our faith is more precious than gold, and, just as gold is refined by fire, so is our faith refined by trials and sufferings.

The image is worth pondering. Fire is used to purify gold, because the impurities that are to be destroyed cannot withstand fire, and gold can. In the process of smelting gold, organic impurities were often mixed with it. At this point, fire was used, because these impurities would burn and gold would not.

If faith is like gold, being purified by suffering is similar to that. We were saying yesterday that a “living hope” is one that no adverse circumstance can kill. Faith, true faith, is such that suffering cannot destroy it. It certainly can and will test it. It certainly can mold and shape it. But it cannot destroy it.

Catherine: One of my favorite images in the New Testament clarifies the situation these early Christians found themselves in. It is in Matthew 9:16—the patch made with new cloth. It may make us feel good to finally patch a favorite old skirt that we have wanted to wear but it had a hole in it. It’s a cotton skirt—the kind of print made in India, with beautiful colors. We forgot, when we patched it, that when we had first gotten the skirt, it was intentionally much too big. That changed when we first washed it. The cloth was unshrunk—“unSanforized.” The patch had been hard to come by, but finally we had found some of the same cloth. It was new, but surely the colors would blend after a while. So far it is like some early Christians who may have seen in the faith some things they wished to use to patch their old lives. And so they “put on” the faith. So far so good. But you know what will happen when that now-patched skirt is washed. The patch will shrink. It will tear away at that old cloth and make the hole even worse. The question

is what will happen to these new Christians when they are put in a difficult situation? If their Christian faith is simply a patch on their old lives, it will tear away and leave them more in need of repair than before! Only if the whole new garment is of a piece—all of the new cloth—will it be able to withstand the effects of persecution, whether subtle or overt persecution. Faith does not work as a patch on an old life. Faith seeks to renew the whole of life. It is situations of suffering and persecution—when faith is tested—that make it clear whether our faith is simply a patch on an otherwise old life, or whether it is really the seed of a totally new life, even though not yet full-grown.

Justo: Christians should not be surprised if their faith leads to difficulties and to suffering. Jesus himself had already established parallelism between his own cross and theirs. “If any would be my disciples, let them take up their cross and follow me.”

The theme of the cross and of suffering is central to Jesus’ own preaching and teaching, both about himself and about his disciples. He knew full well that the course on which he had embarked would lead him to suffering and to the cross. He did not set out on his journey to Jerusalem expecting that everybody would appreciate his good deeds, all would be grateful, and all would receive him with open arms. He knew and he told them that what awaited him in Jerusalem was suffering and the cross.

His disciples—or at least Peter, whose name this Epistle bears—tried to dissuade him. But he would have none of that, and to those who out of love for him tried to persuade him to take an easier course of action he responded, “Depart from me Satan!”

It is not that he cherished the prospect of the cross. Witness to that his anguished prayer at Gethsemani. He did not cherish the cross any more than those early martyrs cherished the prospect of being thrown to the lions or being crucified themselves. He did not cherish it, but he knew that there is redemptive power in suffering, and even in death. He knew that the only way to defeat—really to defeat—the powers of evil was to take all that they had to throw at him, even death, and still come out a winner. And he was right, for many before him, and many after him, chose the path of inertia, letting things happen without confronting them, and they have long been forgotten. And many others, both before and after him, decided to oppose evil with evil, and to counter violence with greater violence, and they too lie forgotten, their dreams shattered in the rubble of history. But he chose the path of the cross. He was crucified, dead, and buried. And the third day he rose from the dead! And it is thanks to his cross and resurrection that we are here today, and that we also hope for our own resurrection.

But Jesus made it very clear that even our own resurrection cannot take place without our sharing also in the cross. He was not out on a campaign to make as many disciples as possible by making the way easy for them. So, he told it just as it was, as it would be, and as it still is today. He told them in so many words that things were going to be hard. His sayings about the

cross were not calculated to make him popular, nor to make people flock to him. He was not on a church-growth campaign. He was rather on a kingdom-announcing campaign. And the kingdom comes through the cross and the resurrection.

There is no other cross that can be equaled to the cross of Jesus. It is his cross that makes our crosses meaningful, just as it is his resurrection that makes our resurrection possible. And yet, in a strange way all the sufferings which Christians must endure because of their faith take the shape of the cross. “Take up your cross and follow me,” he said. And Peter balked at the idea, not only of his own cross, but also of the cross of Jesus. Yet now, in this epistle that bears his name, Christians are being told that there is power in their suffering, just as there is power in the cross of Jesus; that there is power in their suffering because there is power in the cross of Jesus. And so they are being told that, when suffering comes, they should not be surprised, for this is precisely what they should expect.

Born again, conceived anew, heirs to a heavenly inheritance, a new nation, a royal priesthood
All of these things they were. And yet, precisely because they were all these things, they were also exiles in this old order, and their faith, more precious than gold, was to be purified, like gold, through fire!

Catherine: Again, there is a strange parallel between the Cross of Jesus and events in Israel’s history. I Peter parallels Christ’s sufferings and death with the Song of the Suffering Servant, to

be found in Isaiah 53. In fact, it is in this Epistle that the parallel is made most clearly in the New Testament. I Peter 2:21 states: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” And then, to state the way in which Christ suffered for us, the author paraphrases Isaiah 53. Hear first the words of the prophet, just a few verses from that longer, well-known passage:

Justo:

Isaiah 53:5-7: But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth.
(and verse 9): He had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Catherine: Now hear the words from I Peter 2:22-25, which repeat the same images, though in a somewhat different order, as though the author were totally familiar with the Isaiah passage, but was simply referring to it, rather than actually quoting it:

I Peter 2:22-25:

He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

It is quite clear in this passage that Jesus in his suffering fulfills all that the prophet understands to be the role of the Suffering Servant. But when was the Servant Song written, and under what conditions? What did it mean to those who recorded and kept it faithfully as the Word of God for those many centuries between the time of its writing and the time of Jesus?

The best assumption is that this section of Isaiah was written in the 6th century B.C., at the time that all that remained of Israel—the Kingdom of Judah—had been conquered totally, and most of its leading citizens taken into Exile in Babylon. Their way of life as a nation had been destroyed. Their hope for the future was gone. Before the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole kingdom, the great prophets had warned that their sin would bring God's wrath and judgment upon them. They had assumed that, since God had preserved them before, and since the Temple of God was in their midst, surely God would preserve them still. But the promised judgment had come. Then a strange thing occurred. Even some of the same prophets who had once foretold judgment now were saying that God's mercy would also be shown.

Somewhere around 540 B.C., in Babylon, a prophet-poet arose who spoke even more grandly about the work that God was about to do to end the Exile and bring the people back to their home in Judah. The people had already asked if their suffering had not gone far beyond what their sin had deserved. Their children—born in Exile—had asked why they should be suffering for sins not their own? In the great Servant Songs a new kind of answer is given: the Servant of God, whether one person or the whole people, may be called upon to suffer for the sins of

others. If such suffering is endured faithfully, it can be a form of mission and evangelism. It can bring to these others—the ones who cause the suffering—a knowledge of the true God. It can bring both repentance and redemption to them.

The Servant Songs tie into the great themes we find elsewhere in Israel's scripture. The promise to Abraham is that through his descendants all nations of the world shall be blessed. Israel's role is for the sake of the whole world. Now this sixth century poet says that part of the way that role is to be played out is by the undeserved suffering that Israel is now undergoing in Babylon.

Isaiah 52 ends with the imagery of powerful gentile kings—those who have despised little Israel conquered her—looking in astonishment as God, with displays of mighty power, leads an equally surprised Israel back home. And it is these kings who shall say: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.” And chapter 53 ends with the words: “Yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

There is a vision here in Isaiah of the possibility of redemption for those who are the persecutors of God's people. It is a redemption that assumes their repentance, and their realization that those who suffered did so on their behalf. Their suffering was underserved, yet it was fruitful.

The prophet had a glimpse of this strange way in which God was working in history. Yet it was hardly a role that Israel was eager to fulfill. And we can well understand that!

It is this role that Jesus well understood—and lived out. Since he was sinless, there was no question of his deserving any of the suffering that he received, whereas the passages in Isaiah make it quite clear that the prophet believed Israel had indeed deserved part of the suffering.

The great 40th chapter opens with the words:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The issue for Israel was the redemptive possibility of that undeserved portion. For Jesus, the matter was much clearer, since all of the suffering was undeserved. He understood God's strange work of conquering sin by suffering its effects. He willingly took on this role of bearing the sins of many—and even making intercession for the transgressors—as Isaiah 53 concludes.

To make intercession—to pray for those who are persecuting us—surely that is an action contrary to our human instincts! Yet it is that possibility that the prophet proclaimed. Israel did not particularly like the role. Jesus took on the role fully. And now I Peter addresses the church that is also facing the possibility of persecution and suffering. Now the church is called to continue this redemptive work. It is to accept the possibility of suffering for the faith, not grudgingly, but with the acceptance and the understanding that allows those who suffer to love

their persecutors, to pray for them, and to believe that their suffering may be the means for bringing the gospel to those who do not believe. We probably do not like the role any more than Israel did.

Think of Stephen, the first of the Christian martyrs, who, as he was stoned to death, cried: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” In the history of the church, the true and faithful witness of martyrs has been the cause for the expansion of the church. God works in strange and mysterious ways—and none is so strange as the redemptive work of the suffering of the innocent. The climax of this understanding is the cross. But the model continues for the church.

Justo: I Peter writes: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” These are not comfortable steps—they lead to a cross. No wonder these early Christians needed all the encouragement they could get to remain faithful to the new life they had been given. Great joy it was—but remember the words in Hebrews that we should (“look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross...”) It is a joy that sees beyond the cross to that imperishable inheritance. But it is not a joy that avoids or evades the cross.