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1 Peter 1:6-12

Third Message

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# FEET PLANTED UPON THE EARTH

*SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND*

The apostle Peter's word to his fellow-pilgrims in the first century A.D. was that they should keep their eyes fixed on the horizon if they truly wanted to seize the day and live their lives with abandon. They should look to a new heavens and a new earth, a new Zion, a new Jerusalem that was undefiled, incorruptible, and would not fade away. They could live with abandon because they possessed a living and secure hope.

In our text today the viewpoint changes from heaven to earth. Here, the apostle tells believers not about their future salvation but of their present experience of salvation. His word to these aliens and sojourners is that they should keep their feet firmly planted on the earth.

Let us think about this for a moment. What should be our first words to someone who embraces Jesus Christ, is baptized, and embarks on a pilgrim's journey to Zion? What should we tell him to expect in this life? What should a young couple, their faces aglow, having just made idyllic vows of love and commitment to each other in marriage, expect to encounter in their new life together? What should you tell your children to expect as they leave home and go away to school? What can a young adult expect upon entering the business world for the first time? What do you say to a couple when their children finally leave home and the dog dies? They expect retirement bliss, but what will be their experience?

Peter has a word for what all of these various categories of people should expect. It is suffering. This is what life brings. Suffering: Toil, pain, and grief. So although we are pilgrims living in an alien land, with our eyes fixed on the horizon, anticipating a glorious new creation, yet our feet should be planted in this earth. This is the apostle's word for Christians in that first century day and for Christians in all of time.

A number of years ago, when I was college pastor at Peninsula Bible Church, I made it a practice to take our students on a backpacking trip once a year. Once I asked my fellow-pastor Paul Winslow if he would lead the trip, and he agreed. He told me he had in mind a place way up in the High Sierras—Spotted Lakes—where, he said, hardly anyone ever went backpacking. It had snow-capped peaks, sheer granite cliffs tumbling down to the lake-edge, and tremendous fishing. It sounded terrific. Not only that, he said, he knew a shortcut which shaved seven miles off the trail. We could hardly wait to get started.

Getting to Spotted Lakes, however, was another story. I wish my hiking boots could speak! While my thoughts were in the heavens as I contemplated what lay at journey's end, my hiking boots had to walk in the rocks and dust, bearing me and my backpack through much toil and suffering.

The trip had a rather painful beginning. The gas gauge in our van got stuck on "Full," and we ran out of gas on a logging road, 22 miles from the nearest gas station. We had to turn around and coast all the way down the road, at midnight, without lights! And not all of it was downhill. We all had to get out at various points and push the van, and our possessions, uphill. We finally reached our base camp, a small church building, late that night and set up camp. Next morning one

of our girls became very ill and could not continue. Another of our girls volunteered to remain with her and wait for the rest of us to return. But they had to keep moving their tent all weekend because a number of men kept bothering them. Meanwhile, the shortcut to the lake turned out to be a hard slog cross-country over boulders. We had to rock-climb our way over unforged trails to the beautiful setting that always seemed to lie just ahead.

And we found it was beautiful indeed when we finally got there. It was everything we had been led to believe it was. Paul had taken along ropes to teach us rock-climbing. Next day, when I was halfway up a cliff, I heard a thunderous crash below. One of our guys had dislodged a ten-foot boulder which rolled over his foot, breaking it in two places. The boulder rolled down the hill right toward where our students were camped. I thought everyone there was going to be killed, but the rock broke into several pieces and miraculously missed everyone. The remainder of our time at the lake was fairly uneventful, but when we packed up to leave, Paul had to carry the injured student on his back over the five miles of rocky terrain back to the van. And I had to carry Paul's backpack, as well as my own!

It was quite a weekend, not at all what we had expected. Certainly the vision we had been presented with at the beginning was fulfilled. The horizon on which we had our eyes fixed was worth the effort it took to get there. But the journey was strewn with rocks and dust, hardship, toil and pain. My hiking boots, which were firmly planted on the earth throughout the trip, would attest to that.

This is the point that Peter is making to these first century believers. Already he has painted for them a picture of their future salvation; now he goes on to tell them of their experience of salvation in this life, and that will involve suffering. At first, Christians were tolerated and even encouraged by the Roman government. But by A.D. 64 they had become so unpopular that Nero could make them scapegoats for the great fire of Rome. More than once Peter alludes to the slander and insults they faced (1 Pet 2:12; 3:14, 16; 4:14). They were accused of cannibalism (eating the body of Christ), and incest (for giving one another a "holy kiss"), etc.

Between A.D. 75–98, under the Flavian emperors and Domitian, a new form of persecution was adopted. Now Christians were condemned not on a specific charge, but for simply bearing the name "Christian" (1 Pet 4:14). No charge or crime of immorality was brought against them, rather Christians were simply asked, "Are you a Christian?" Their reply was grounds for the death sentence. Trajan's reign (A.D. 98–117) "was marked by a policy of imperial expansion; the frontiers of the empire were pushed beyond the Rhine, Danube and Euphrates...the Roman civilization in the new province of Dacia has left its mark in the name, language and general culture of the land and people of Romania" (F.F. Bruce).

During this period the policy of executing Christians merely for bearing the name Christ was fully employed. This is seen in the correspondence of Pliny, a young governor in Bithynia (part of the area to which Peter addressed his letter), to the Emperor Trajan:

My Lord: It is my custom to refer to you everything that I am in doubt about; for who is better able either to correct my hesitation or instruct my ignorance? So far this has been my procedure when people were charged before me with being Christians. I have asked the accused themselves if they were Christians; if they said “yes,” I asked them a second and third time, warning them of the penalty; if they persisted I ordered them to be led off to execution. For I had no doubt that, whatever kind of thing it was that they pleaded guilty to, their stubbornness and unyielding obstinacy at any rate deserved to be punished. There were others afflicted with the like madness whom I marked down to be referred to Rome, because they were Roman citizens.

The case seemed to me to a proper one for consultation, particularly because of the number of those who were accused. For many of every age, every class, and of both sexes are being accused and will continue to be accused. Nor has this contagious superstition spread through the cities only, but also through the villages and the countryside. But I think it can be checked and put right. At any rate the temples, which had been well nigh abandoned, are beginning to be frequented again... From all this it is easy to judge what a multitude of people can be reclaimed, if an opportunity is granted them to renounce Christianity. (F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*)

These are the times to which Peter is writing. And the apostle’s word to us today is the same as it was to these believers in the first century and every century since. He wants to us to have our feet planted on the earth, and to have a realistic perspective on suffering. He tells us the purpose of suffering; what our response to suffering should be; and finally, he tells us of the privilege of suffering.

**In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:6-9 NASB)**

## I. A Realistic Perspective on Suffering (1:6)

### A. It is But For A “Little While”

Peter begins by giving Christians a realistic perspective on suffering. The first thing he says is that suffering in this life is only for “a little while.” If your perspective is eternity, not time, then you will view life as something of very short duration. Even if your affliction to you seems long-term--perhaps you are suffering from disease, or rejection, or loneliness--Peter says that is still just “a little while” compared to eternity.

### B. It Is An Absolute Necessity

The second thing Peter says about suffering is that it is an absolute necessity. Jeremiah wrote his book of Lamentations following the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. He saw all the horror of the bloodshed, the cannibalism and the cruelty, yet he wrote these words,

It is good for a man that he should bear,  
Thy yoke in his youth.  
Let him sit alone and be silent  
Since He has laid it on him.  
Let him put his mouth in the dust,  
Perhaps there is a hope.  
Let him give his cheek to the smiter;

**Let him be filled with reproach.**

**For the Lord will not reject forever,**

**For if He causes grief,**

**Then He will have compassion**

**According to His abundant loyal love.**

**For He does not afflict willingly [from His heart],**

**Or grieve the sons of men. (Lam 3:19-32)**

The writer to the Hebrews goes even further:

**But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Heb 12:8)**

Suffering, according to the apostle, is an absolute necessity in the Christian life.

### C. It Does Cause Grief to the Soul

No matter what form the suffering takes, it does cause grief (“distress”) to the soul. Suffering hurts; it grieves the soul. In the New Testament, this word is used of the time when Jesus told his disciples he would have to go to the cross. It is also used of Jesus in Gethsemane, when he asked that the cup pass from him. This is the grief which the apostle Paul felt when his spiritual children in Corinth rejected him and his gospel.

What are the implications of this? First, we should not be surprised by it. Suffering is the norm in the Christian life. We should expect it, and we should teach it, especially to young converts. The first thing a young convert ought to hear is that one enters the Kingdom of God through many afflictions.

Second, though Peter says we live in hope, we will still grieve. Hope may transcend grief but it does not obliterate it. We must allow each other the freedom to lament as part of our worship. At times we are so eager to get on to resurrection life we bury our grief and do not deal with it. We are ready with glib answers. But this is wrong. One third of the psalms, the Hebrew book of worship, are psalms of lament and grief, remembering national disasters and individual grief. Many of the psalms do not provide any answers, but all of them provide opportunity for believers to bring their grief in worship to the Lord. Christians at times need opportunity to hurt and weep, not answers to their dilemmas. We must not speak too quickly or grief may be buried.

The deaths of two of my children taught me this. My father has a Welsh background, my mother English, and both are stoics. I was taught never to show emotion or share grief. Even when my son was in intensive care, my mother said to me, “I promised myself I would not cry”—so as not to be a burden to us. But I have learned the value of grief, the cleansing aspects of it, and how it leads us to deeper things in our worship of God.

So it is very important that Christians have a realistic view of suffering, according to Peter. Suffering is necessary, and therefore we should expect it. But we must allow ourselves the freedom to express our grief, for hope does not obliterate sorrow. Finally, we should see suffering in light of eternity. It is merely for “a little while.”

## II. The Goal Of Suffering (1:7)

**that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.**

### A. A Proven Faith

The word “proof” was used of purifying and strengthening metals by passing them through fire. The fire brought the impurities to the surface to be skimmed off, and in the natural cooling process the metal was tempered and thus strengthened. In like manner, the fire of suffer-

ing removes the impurities of our faith and strengthens it. Our faith is not pure; it needs testing. We trust God, but we also depend on our other things—our background, our wisdom, wealth, or relationships, even our scheming. But suffering removes these things, purifying our faith, with the result that when we go to heaven, “at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” our faith will be perfect, without impurities. Did you know that in heaven we will live by faith also? But in heaven our faith will be so pure that the life of Christ will come flowing through us in a symphony of praise and glory to God. This is what God seeks for us.

Hezekiah was a godly king in Israel, but his faith needed testing. The Assyrians had utterly destroyed the Northern Kingdom, and Hezekiah responded by increasing taxation on his people to pay for military resources to defend Judah. He had many chariots built. He tore down buildings in Jerusalem in order to fortify the walls of the city. He built a conduit, Hezekiah’s tunnel, in the middle of the city that would withstand a siege. He felt ready for the coming assault. But the prophet Isaiah came to him and said, “Hezekiah, you did all this but not by Me. You did not check in with God but instead trusted your own strength— your defenses, your chariots, your arm of flesh. But all of this will be of no avail. The Assyrians are coming like a flood which will overflow the Euphrates, all through Judea, and this flood will come right up to your neck. There it will stop, by grace.”

This is exactly what happened. The Assyrians wiped out all of Hezekiah’s defenses and surrounded Jerusalem. They came taunting Hezekiah and blaspheming the name of the Lord. There was nothing left for the king to do but to pray. Hezekiah took the blasphemous letters to the temple and laid them out before the altar. There he prayed, “God, save this city for the sake of your loyal love.” Finally, he had arrived where God wanted him to be. That night an angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrians. God has tested and purified Hezekiah’s faith.

This is what God is doing with us when we get sick, when we feel lonely and rejected, when we are out of work. It must be God plus nothing.

There we have the purpose of suffering.

### III. Our Present Response To Suffering (1:8-9)

Peter continues, in verses 8-9, by telling us what suffering does for us in the present.

**Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.**

Suffering, according to these verses, helps us in three ways in our relationship with God.

#### A. To Love Him

At first I took these statements by Peter to be imperatives, but now I feel they are indicatives; they are descriptions. God designs suffering for us, and this is what it does in our present experience. First, suffering causes us to love God; it increases our capacity to love him. Proverbs says,

**My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord,  
Or loathe His reproof,  
For whom the Lord loves He reproves,  
Even as a father, the son in whom he delights. (Prov 3:11-12)**

Whenever we are wounded, that is when we feel the love of God. God cares for us. He wants us to be righteous. When we are wounded we are weak and vulnerable. Then, as we share this, all the saints enter into our experience and begin to weep with us, showing forth the love

of Christ and fulfilling the royal law, the commandment of Jesus that we should “love one another.” Suffering helps us to obey the commandments. We can say with the psalmist, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Thy word” (Ps 119:67).

#### B. To Trust Him

We should not break covenant with God by turning to other means of salvation in the crises, but trust in him alone.

#### C. To Rejoice In Him

Suffering increases our capacity for joy. Like the saints of old in “tears of the night,” we prepare songs of victory in the morning, when we can express our joy to the fullest. Such joy so overcomes the soul it cannot be put into words, and gives full weight to the majesty of Christ.

One of my closest friends was wounded deeply last week. As he led our men’s group on Wednesday morning, he began by saying that it was a very difficult day for him. On that day three years ago, he said, his six-week-old son died. This great loss had purified his faith and taught him to love God. The pain was further intensified, he told us, because his grandmother had just died and he was going to her funeral that very day. To make matters even more painful, his wife had miscarried earlier that week. As we watched our strong leader become weak and vulnerable, a wave of transcendent love filled that room. No one spoke a word. All sensed the presence of Christ.

This is what suffering does. It increases our capacity to know the love of God as it is expressed through the saints.

When Dick and Geryl Giese’s little boy Andrew was born just a few weeks ago he swallowed some meconium, and we were not sure he was going to live. The doctors had to treat him with a rare procedure in which they put a shunt in one of the arteries that led to his brain in order to drain out his blood and thus allow his lungs to heal. Dick shared with me that in the midst of this pain he and Geryl truly learned how to sing. Every night they sang the hymn *How Great Thou Art* to their little Andrew. One evening as they sat in their car outside the hospital with another couple they sang that hymn together. He said that they all felt they had been transcended to heaven. In anticipation of what God was going to do, he shared, they were either going to have a wonderful baby dedication or a wonderful memorial service. Such was the faith which this couple possessed. But God spared that little life, and we are going to have a great baby dedication.

Suffering then, according to Peter, is the mandatory road to reach this glorious salvation we are destined to inherit. Let us not be surprised by it, but welcome it as a friend that will purify and strengthen us. And let us rejoice in its greatest benefit, as it creates in the human heart a greater capacity for God, who has infinite pleasures to dispense to those who love him.

This is what we need to hear from the evangelists. I get so tired of evangelistic programs and gimmicks that come in the mail all the time. But I think God has a very simple plan for evangelism. It is accomplished by pilgrims living out their lives in this world. As we go out we are wounded, which makes us weak, which in turn makes us vulnerable, which causes us to pray to God, and then the love of all the saints pours over us in a symphony. As the world watches this they see Jesus Christ and they themselves want to partake of this life. That is God’s evangelistic thrust. Go on out into the world and be wounded. As the world watches, the Kingdom of God grows.

#### IV. The Privilege Of Suffering (1:10-12)

Peter ends this section on suffering by writing on the past history of salvation, in verses 10-12.

**As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what time or manner of time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.**

The apostle has been looking into our present salvation, which is characterized by suffering. Now he goes into the past history of our salvation, saying, “As to this salvation, the prophets wrote about it.” Here we get an insight into the revelation given to the prophets who hungered for illumination, even into their own writings. In this case it was clear that Messiah would come and suffer, and an age of glory would follow. The prophets knew what they had prophesied, but they did not know at *what date* or in *what stage* of history (i.e. what season of time) the prophecy would be fulfilled. Though they had revelation, they studied, searched out, and reflected on what they wrote to attain deeper insight into the mystery of *when*.

I find it intriguing that the prophets had questions about what they wrote. They did not have all the answers. They were instruments, human minds, behind which was a divine mind writing more in the text than they understood. Like us, the prophets had to do Bible study, and they had to pray for greater illumination about the things which they themselves had written.

Some texts may read that they were “seeking to know the person or the time,” but I don’t think that is what it should say. I think it should be translated “what time or manner of time” the Spirit was indicating about Christ. They had a question: When will these things be? They were diligent. They prayed for illumination and, by God’s grace, their minds were illumined. They discovered that they were not writing about their generation, but about us, you and me. What a privilege, to be living in an age which the prophets wrote about! The Old Testament is speaking about you and me.

There are two implications to all of this, according to the apostle. The grace and the glory about which the prophets wrote is now available by the Holy Spirit, but it demands appropriation. Our age is characterized by suffering—we enter into the sufferings of Christ—but Christ also inaugurated the glories to follow. So when suffering comes, the Spirit can give your body glory and grace to meet the need.

Secondly, says Peter, this grace is divinely instructive. Ours is an age characterized by “things into which angels long to look.” When you are undergoing suffering, the spotlight turns on you, and an audience of angels studies you with awe and amazement as they observe God’s redemption at work. Though the outer man is decaying, though we suffer disease or loneliness or divorce or death, even turmoil of our own making, the angels are studying us all the while.

What other response can these things evoke in us but the response of gratitude to God! What amazing grace! Here is a salvation gifted to us before the beginning of time, which broke into history and secured an everlasting inheritance which is guaranteed along with its recipient. Seen in such light we must think small of our present sufferings

which, rather than thwarting the purposes of God, enhances them in full measure. How can we not but give abounding thanks that we live in an age which the prophets only dreamed about, and the angels study with awe. Thanks be to God!

The early Christians responded faithfully to Peter’s letter. Trajan wrote back commending the policy of Pliny, and this policy was continued by his successors, Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), and Antonine (138-161). During this time, one of the best known Christian martyrs was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who was executed in 156. After the proconsul attempted to persuade him to revile Christ and be set free, he replied, “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my Saviour and King?” Polycarp was then sent to be burned at the stake. What a glorious example of the truth embodied in 1 Peter!

I am thrilled to know that that same spirit is alive in pilgrims today. Occasionally we are privileged to meet what I call a radical pilgrim, and over the last several months I have come to know such a young man. Kevin is in his late 20’s, and a graduate of Stanford University. He went out into the corporate world as a stockbroker, and his future opened up before him like an oyster. But his faith was on the back burner of his life until suffering entered the picture. He had severe stomach pains, which were misdiagnosed as a problem with ulcers, but on his fourth visit to the emergency room it was discovered that he had advanced cancer of the colon. It had gone deeply into the large intestine and had spread to the lymph nodes. Following surgery, the doctors gave this young man six months to live. He submitted his body to radiation treatment and received such a large dose that his body was burned inside and out. Amazingly, after this treatment, no trace of cancer could be found. They don’t know whether it will return, however. Then he had to undergo more surgery to repair the damage done by the radiation. His pain is still so intense that he has to take 150 milligrams of morphine each day. He can’t drive a car or work as a stockbroker.

In the midst of this trial, he met a young woman and they began dating. He told me that often their dates would end up in an emergency room. During his lengthy stay at the hospital, she came to see him every morning before work, and every day after work she read the Psalms to him for several hours. The pain was so intense, and his body so filled with drugs, he built his days around those visits. But his suffering only enhanced their love and strengthened their faith in Christ. Three weeks ago, this young couple shared their wedding vows. You can imagine the impact this ceremony had on a large group of people, many of whom were not Christians. “In sickness and in health,” read the pastor, but they have known only sickness. They came down the aisle together, weeping with joy, with no guarantees about their future.

Their eyes of this young couple are fixed on the horizon, and their feet are firmly planted on the earth. They want to live as pilgrims, a testimony of faith to those around them. They would tell you that everything Peter says about suffering is true. Suffering is real, and it grieves the soul. Yet suffering had purified their faith because they relied solely on God. Suffering had created their love for one another, enhanced their love for Christ, and given them an increased capacity for joy.

Pilgrims, keep your eyes fixed on the horizon, but keep your feet planted on the earth. Amen.

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