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“Stand Fast!”

The First Epistle of Peter

Lesson 1, for Sunday, October 14, 2001

Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ κατὰ τὸ πολὺ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος ἀναγεννήσας ἡμᾶς εἰς ἐλπίδα ζώσαν δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκ νεκρῶν, εἰς κληρονομίαν ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀμίαντον καὶ ἀμάραντον, τετηρημένην ἐν οὐρανοῖς εἰς ὑμᾶς τοὺς ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ φρουρουμένους διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν ἐτοιμῆν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι ἐν καιρῷ ἐσχάτῳ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:3-5, NAS

The writings of Peter are different in many ways from that of Paul. Because Paul wrote so many of the New Testament books, we become used to his way of phrasing things, and by comparison, we sense that Peter is amazingly direct and to the point.

Author: From a very early date, the Church universally accepted that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter. This epistle was quoted by Clement of Rome in about 95 A.D., by Polycarp sometime before his martyrdom in 155 A.D., and by Irenaeus (c. 130-216) who quotes him by name. No one seriously questioned this until the late 19th century, when all of Christianity came under attack under the guise of textual criticism.

Recipients: Christians living in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). The context indicates that the recipients were facing major persecution for their faith at this time. Furthermore, we can see that they were living in a pagan culture, and dealing with the difficulties of how to live and show their faith in a hostile situation.

Date: 64 A.D. approximately. Since Peter was martyred not too long after this, which sets the latest date when it could have been written. The references to persecution seem to reflect the oncoming of the persecutions of the emperor Nero. This was the first of the empire-wide persecutions.

Key Issues:

1. Since our true inheritance cannot be marred by what others do to us, we are secure in our salvation.
2. Since the pagans are watching us, even as they persecute us, some pagans may be led to believe.
3. Our behavior speaks loudly, and thus practical holiness is a visible form of witness to those around us.
4. If we are persecuted for doing what is right, we are still to do what is right.
5. We are to treat our fellow believers as our Lord has treated us, i.e. with grace and gentleness, as befits our standing.

Persecution in the Roman Empire:

In the Roman empire, there were both legal and illegal religions. In order to be considered legal, a religion had to be both moral and loyal. The early Christians had no problems with the authorities in the area of morality, as they usually met or exceeded the Roman requirements in this regard. It was loyalty which got them in trouble.

The Roman emperors, by this time, had come to refer to themselves as gods. No one, even among their staunchest supporters, seems to have believed that they had any supernatural powers. On the other hand, they demanded to be worshipped, at least nominally. For a pagan, who had a whole pantheon of Roman, Greek, and local “deities” of varying importance, this seemed to be no big deal. Go down to the market, buy the smallest stick of incense the merchants would sell, and put it in the coals at the local shrine. For a Christian, this of course was blasphemous. Thus, since they would not acknowledge Caesar as god, they were considered disloyal. Furthermore, because they had no “god shelf” for their idols at home, the pagans considered them to be “godless” and thus dangerous. Christianity thus became an illegal religion.

Outline of First Peter

(from Paine, p. 1443)

Theme: Suffering in the life of the believer

Key verse: I Peter 4:1

- I. Comfort and reassurance in suffering (1:1 -1:25)**
 - A. Salutation (1:1,2).
 - B. Reassurance in the realized facts of Christ’s gospel (1:3-12).
 - C. Reassurance in divinely bought holiness of life (1:13-25).
- II. The chastened response of practical holiness (2:1-3:22)**
 - A. The negative and positive bases of holiness (2:1-2:3).
 - B. The readers’ participation in a holy community, the Church (2:4-2:10).
 - C. Unimpeachable living, the answer to persecution (2:11-3:13).
 1. Deference to statutes, officers, fellow citizens (2:11-2:17).
 2. Submission by servants, even to injustice (2:18-2:25).
 3. Deference of wives to husbands (3:1-3:6).
 4. Consideration for wives (3:7).
 5. Divine love among the saints (3:8-3:13).
 - D. Victory in unjust suffering (3:14-3:22).
 1. Basic blessedness, freedom from terror (3:14, 3:15a).
 2. Respectful apologetic supported by probity of life (3:15b-3:17).
 3. Christ the believer’s example (3:18-3:21).
 4. Christ the believer’s reassurance (3:22).
- III. The spiritual significance of suffering (4:1-4:19)**
 - A. Physical suffering a type of death to the flesh life (4:1-4:6).
 1. Christ’s death the example and empowerment (4:1a).
 2. Dying to the sin nature; alive to God (4:1b-4:6).
 - B. The “crucified Life” characterized by divine love (4:7-4:11).
 - C. The fires of persecution seen as purifying (4:12-19).
- IV. Divine love as a guide in church life (5:1-5:11)**
 - A. Elders to rule in love (5:1-5:7).
 - B. The Devil to be resisted through divine grace (5:8-5:11).
- V. Closing salutations and benediction (5:12-5:14)**