

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER - PART V

DEALING WITH PERSECUTION

I. The third major section gives instruction on the response to persecution. After an introduction, it describes the rightful attitude toward persecution, i.e., that it is a means of drawing closer to Christ, the rightful response of a calmness and righteous conduct, and the importance of unity with the priests.

II. The first five verses introduce the theme of receiving a blessing through suffering and the importance of defending the faith by words and actions.

A. It begins by contrasting harm and suffering, saying that no one can harm those who seek righteousness, even if they suffer.

- The idea is that the only final harm is injury to the soul, and no persecutor can harm a person's soul without his consent. See Matt. 10:16-33. God will care for the person's soul, even if his material life is damaged.

- This idea connects the Old Testament blessings of prosperity for the just, as in for example Psalm 34 just quoted, with the recognition that the just will be persecuted. See also Wis. 3:1-4:19.

B. The letter then goes further and says that the sufferings would bring blessings. See Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23.

- Precisely by refusing to be fearful of what the world can take away one recognizes Christ as Lord, rather than the world. It is the final form of revolution, against the tyrants of the world in general.

- It may seem odd to say that we can "sanctify" or "hallow" Christ as Lord, for He is perfect in holiness and power already. The idea may be that we are already in the body of Christ and we make that body more holy by recognizing Christ as Lord.

C. The introduction then gives practical advice about defending the faith.

1. It first says be ready to give a defense, presumably in words. People should know, according to their abilities, how to

explain the faith. Jesus did say not to "worry" about what one will say before persecutors. See Matt. 10:19; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11. But He also instructed His disciples to be as shrewd as serpents, even as we are as innocent as doves. See Matt. 10:16; cf. Heb. 6:1-3.

2. But the letter also instructs that the arguments should be given "gentleness and reverence." The idea is that argumentation, even if accurate, can be given in such a harsh or irreverent style that it is not likely to persuade.

- By contrast, a calm, reasoned response to harsh and unreasonable oppression will really astonish people and make those who are unreasonable feel ashamed.

D. The introduction also refers to keeping one's conscience clear so that any suffering is really for the faith, and not because of ill deeds.

- This instruction probably refers to both keeping one's conscience clear in giving a response, and also in one's overall conduct, lest one's behavior undermine one's message.

III. The letter then turns to an explanation of why we are blessed when we suffer, i.e., that we are following Christ, who gives us strength from suffering.

A. It was a common theme of Christ that His disciples would have to struggle with Him. See, e.g., Matt. 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14:26-27; John 15:18-25.

- This letter calls us to imitate Him, who died for our sins, by being willing to suffer for the sake of others that they may also be cleansed from sin. The very suffering puts us closer to the perfection of Christ, and therefore, closer to His resurrection. See, e.g., Rom. 8:18-25

B. The letter then refers to Christ preaching to "the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey." There are several other references to Jesus' descent among the dead. See, e.g., Matt. 12:38-41; Acts 2:24-31; Eph. 4:8-9. But they refer primarily to the fact that Jesus truly died. This passage, possibly along with chapter 4, verse 6, refers to Jesus preaching among the dead. See Catechism 632

- Some, such as Fr. Raymond Brown, have argued that these spirits were evil angels who instigated the sins that led to the Great Flood, arguing that in Jewish apocalyptic literature there were references to preaching to the evil angels. See, e.g., 1 Enoch 6-11; 2 Enoch 7: 1-3, 8:3-6.
- A more common view, proposed for example by St. Clement of Alexandria in the 3rd century and St. Robert Bellarmine in the 16th, is that the preaching was to people who were sinful at the time of Noah, but who may have repented. They would be in prison, bound by their sins, and not allowed into heaven, but still able to receive the Gospel. See St. Clement, Stromata Book VI ch. 6.
- St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas believed that this passage is a reference to Christ's sacrifice in some mysterious way being revealed to the people at the time of the Flood, and God giving them time to repent. See Summa Theologica Part III, question 52, reply obj. 3.
- The reference could be ambiguous as to whether the souls that Christ preached to were condemned (as with the fallen angels), saved (as with the repentant) or a combination (as with all of those at the time of the Flood.) The idea seems to be that, as Christ through His suffering witnessed to sinners, who may or may not have repented, likewise, Christians are called to be witnesses through suffering to a sinful world.

C. The letter clearly refers to the image of the Great Flood and Noah's Ark to baptism, which cuts off a sinful realm to save those who listen to God (and possibly, by extension their family.) See Acts 16:31.

- Here, as is common in the New Testament, it is assumed that one is baptized to be a disciple of Christ. See also Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:1-4; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:12.
- The idea is that Baptism gives one a fresh start free from the world and raises one to a fresh, new state. As Christ (in His human nature) rose to complete power through His suffering, which at least twice He called a baptism, see Mark 10:38, Luke 12:50, so too all Christians will rise to full power through a share in that suffering.
- There is also a reminder that, as Noah probably looked foolish in building an Ark, so too Christians may look foolish to the world. But in both cases, what is foolish to the world is wisdom in the light of Christ. See 1 Cor. 1:18-25, 4:9-13.

D. The passage refers to baptism as a "pledge" or "appeal" (eperoteama) for a clean conscience. This term could refer either to God's pledge to us that we are cleansed from sin, or our commitment to follow through. In either case, the idea is that baptism leads one to a lasting cleanliness that the world cannot provide. See, e.g., Ps. 51:3-4, 9-12; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 7:13-17.

IV. The letter then calls for Christians to defend themselves against the vices of the world.

A. Taking up the martial image from a chapter and a half earlier, the letter calls for Christians to "arm yourself with the same attitude. . . so as not to spend what remains of one's in the flesh or human desires."

- The image is of the evil forces, having been forced out by the flood of baptism, now trying to attack again.

B. The letter gives another powerful image that "one who suffers in the flesh has broken from sin." This phrase could mean several things.

1. Above all, Christ suffered in the flesh and thus perfectly showed us the way to sin.

2. The suffering of Christians, by strengthening the spirit, breaks off the desire for sin, and the attraction of the world. See, e.g., Heb. 12:11

3. When the world turns against Christians in persecution, its seductive philosophy is no longer attractive; the open opposition makes the evil of the world more obvious.

4. The more one's life is a joining with the suffering of Christ in love, the more one removes sin. See, e.g., Rom. 6:1-11; 1 John 3:6. The saints have been perfected in this love.

C. The letter also presents us as "spending" our life. We cannot keep the present life. The question is what we spend it on. The parable of the talents indicates the folly of merely trying to save one's opportunities. Rather, if we spend them on God we make a glorious investment, rewarded with greater realms. See Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27.

D. The letter then dramatically contrasts the "what Gentiles like to do" with the action of those who know that "the end of all things is at hand." See also Gal. 5:13-23; Eph. 4:17-24.

1. As Romans does, the letter connects idolatry to decadent practices. See Rom. 1:18-32.

- The letter refers to people engaged in decadence as living "in a swamp of profligacy" and unable to understand why people want to live in a different land. The idea is both to give a vivid image of the decadent life, as contrasted with the green plains and cities of virtue, and also to illustrate the folly of following such a life. Their surprise is presumably one reason for the persecution,
- Wisdom literature often portrayed the just as living in green fields or the solid city of Jerusalem. See, e.g., Ps. 1, 15, 23, 125; Sir. 6:18-23. The letter is applying this image to those outside of the faith who practice immorality.

2. The letter says that Christ will come to judge them, but again holds out hope for conversion, saying that the Gospel "was preached to the dead that, though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God."

- In this case, "the dead" may well mean those dead in sin, although alive on earth. The Gospel was brought to them and many were saved. See Mark 2:16-27.
- There may also be again to the fact that those who died before Christ and who lived in sin may yet have received the Gospel, repented and been saved.
- It could also mean the just who died before Christ (although they also would have lived to some degree in sin) and were brought to heaven by Christ. See Catechism 634.

3. In contrast to this behavior of the Gentiles, the new Chosen People are to "keep sane and sober" with good conduct.

- The implication is that to go back to the old way would be spiritual madness.
- Consistent with the Christian message, love is the controlling principle, here especially emphasized as a show of repentance for sins. In quoting Proverbs, the letter is implicitly bringing in the wisdom of that book. See Prov.

10:12.

- The letter then gives specific maxims regarding hospitality and the use of all other gifts, whether internal or external, physical or intellectual, for the glory of God.