

God has called you to his eternal glory in Christ

Acts 1:6–14

Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

John 17:1–11

Text: 1 Peter 5:10

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Introduction

In Bernhard Schlink’s 2016 novel *The Woman On The Stairs*, the well-past-middle-aged lawyer, who is the nameless protagonist in the story, said this as he surveyed his life:

“I do not rue my age. I don't envy the young for the lives they had ahead of them; I do not want mine before me again. But I do envy them their short past. When we're young, we can survey our past. We can give it meaning, even if that meaning constantly changes. Now, looking over the past, I have no idea what was a blessing, what was a curse; whether my career was worth the price; and when my encounters with women succeeded, and when they failed.” (p. 47)

I found this ‘life survey,’ put on the lips of this lawyer, a poignant expression of the modern struggle to find meaning in life. I admire novelists who can so accurately depict our human struggles in so personal a fashion. I am not in the habit of reading many modern novels so am unable to make any general comment on their overall content. I did find it striking as I read *The Woman On The Stairs*, that not one of the characters in the story lives their life with any reference to God.

1. The Apostle Peter is well past middle age as he prepares and sends this letter to believers who live in the Roman provinces that comprised Asia Minor. Peter is writing from Rome and Mark is with him; yes, the Mark we know as the gospel writer. Some thirty years have come and gone since that day of Jesus’ ascension. In the course of his work of proclaiming Jesus Christ the Apostle Peter’s ministry has taken him from Jerusalem to Samaria, perhaps to parts of Asia Minor, and now to Rome. He has known firsthand what it means to be reviled for the name of Christ. Yet, here he is in Rome, in the belly of the beast, so to speak, making known the name of Jesus Christ.

We Christians sometimes read these Apostolic letters, such as 1 Peter, like a theology manual and overlook the humanity of the people in the story. What is it, or who is it, that keeps the Apostle Peter and his companion Mark going, pressing on with the work of making Christ known and why do they commend faith in Jesus to others? Are they seeking popularity? If they were, they wouldn’t be commending to people faith in a man that the Romans crucified as a heinous criminal. Were they seeking wealth? Belonging to a sometimes-persecuted religious group was hardly lucrative. No. They are compelled by Jesus whom they have found personally to be all that he promises to be for them in this life and, therefore, commend Jesus to any who would receive him.

With this picture of the Apostle Peter in our minds, I invite you to hear again what he says about living life oriented to God; listen afresh for the substance of our existence in Christ that he commends to the churches; indeed, that he would commend to any who would believe. “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” How does that narrative for living our lives compare to the novelist’s narrative who says, “Now, looking over the past, I have no idea what was a blessing, what was a curse?” Which story of our existence do you find compelling?

I get it that the Apostle Peter’s comment about suffering does not sound immediately compelling; “and after you have suffered for a little while”. However, the fact that he identifies suffering as suffering (as something we ought not like) arises from his conviction that suffering has no future in the eternal glory in Christ. I find it much more appealing to call suffering, ‘suffering’, than to say, “I have no idea what was a blessing, what was a curse.”

I invite you to think for a moment of the people Peter envisions as he crafts his message to them. In their world people who abstained from worshipping the local gods, as Christians did, were suspected of wishing trouble upon their city or region. Additionally, people who refused to offer the annual worship ritual to the Emperor were considered seditious. In fact, early Christians were accused of being atheists because they abstained from these things. Peter encourages the believers to stand fast, stressing the divine verdict about their identity in Christ.

Christians today also find opposition because of loyalty to Christ; the ideologies that shape our culture are not impressed with our loyalty to him. Consider how talk of God is prohibited in education and politics. Christians are seen as opposed to freedom because Christian faith does not promote the sexualized agenda of the world around us. Peter’s letter of encouragement is also timely for us; encouragement to stand firm in the faith.

Also, in looking at the various issues Peter addresses in the letter it is apparent that people of the churches come from across the spectrum of Roman society. Some were household owners—the wealthy of society. Most were not. There would be many indentured people, slaves with no rights; many were women who had little standing in society. Our lives are very different than theirs in many respects, particularly in freedoms and access to health care and in how we earn a living. Yet the human needs are parallel for food and shelter and clothing.

Peter is well acquainted with what people face. In commending Jesus Christ to them as the narrative around which to orient their lives he implies that every aspect of life is gathered up in this glorious summary, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” Note the simultaneous accent on past calling and the future destiny. The story of our existence is that God called us into his eternal glory; this is the story of Jesus Christ in which our lives unfold. Every aspect of life—how we earn a living, where we live, significant life relationships—is gathered up and infused with the life that is Jesus Christ as we live life oriented to this grace of God in our lives. Written over the life we live by faith in him is this wonder; “the God of all grace has called you to his eternal glory in Christ.”

2. The Apostle Peter was there on that Ascension Day; the day Jesus was “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Jesus had just commissioned them—“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” I invite you to consider how these Apostles experienced the impact of Jesus’ Ascension. They return to Jerusalem and devote themselves to prayer and they are all together anticipating the reception of the promised power when the Holy Spirit will ignite them. It is particularly important to note that none of them express sorrow because Jesus ascended; rather they are energised to get on with the commission Jesus gave them. They do not experience the ascension of Jesus as being abandoned by Jesus; they do not experience this as Jesus leaving them on their own. In fact, Luke tells us, at the end of his gospel, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

When you read the new testament it is important to keep in mind that it is the old testament and the story of God with his people Israel that informs the imagery in how new testament authors speak of their experience of Jesus. So, when you read that on Ascension Day ‘a cloud took him out of their sight,’ the way to understand the significance of the cloud is to look to this older testament story. In Psalm 68 (read today) we read of God “who rides upon the clouds” and of when God “went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness.” The reference is to the cloud of God’s presence that went in front of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). The cloud is the cloud of our Lord’s presence with us. Jesus didn’t bolt for heaven as if he had enough of earth. He takes up his place in the presence of God so he can be everywhere present with us.

Some thirty years after Ascension day, this same Apostle Peter is calling on believers to stand firm in their faith. But this call to stand firm is never a call to stand alone as if Jesus sent you out there by yourself to see how you would fare. Far from it. The Apostle Peter assures them and us that “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” Why would Peter say this? He says this because he has experienced this restoring, supporting, strengthening, establishing grace of the Lord Jesus in his own life. Recall that he was the disciple who denied knowing Jesus, whom our Lord tenderly restores at the breakfast on the beach. The Apostle has experienced this as a continuing grace in his life.

Remember that our Lord completes in us what he commands of us—our standing firm is to participate in our Lord’s work of keeping us. All of these words the Apostle uses to describe our Lord’s help to stand firm—restore, support, strengthen, establish—are roughly synonymous. He is multiplying synonyms to encourage standing firm. The emphasis repeated in the similar words lets us know the completeness of our Lord’s keeping work; nothing is overlooked; nothing is left to chance—he will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Also keep in mind the future aspect of what the Apostle is declaring. Recall the simultaneous accent on past calling and the future destiny; “God has called you to his eternal glory in Christ.” As we write this vision of a life lived in reference to God over our own; as we live by the narrative of God’s saving grace in our lives we note both the present and future aspects of this restoring, supporting, strengthening, establishing work of Christ. In the myriad ways we have experienced his grace in our lives—when we were restored from disappointment, strengthened

through hardships, supported in trials, established again on solid footing—all these point forward to their consummation the Apostle describes as ‘God’s eternal glory in Christ.’

The Apostle Peter is writing from Rome—as he goes on to say ‘your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings.’ Why does he call it Babylon? Babylon is the capital city of the peoples who captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 586 B.C. It became a symbol for powers opposed to God; a symbol used in this way throughout the book of Revelation. It is why I said earlier that Peter in writing from Rome, was writing from the belly of the beast, so to speak. It is quite likely that Peter writes this letter very close to when the Emperor Nero blames the Christians for the burning of Rome; perhaps the persecution is already underway. Tradition tells us that Peter was crucified along with the Apostle Paul in the ensuing wave of persecution of Christians. I point this out to note that Peter does not give us this call to stand firm from an ivory tower. I also point out that his Apostolic witness is still bearing fruit today long after the Roman Empire disappeared. Indeed, our Lord established Peter—a promise to each of us.

4. We touched on it earlier and I want to circle back to it again; to Peter’s comment acknowledging suffering; ‘And after you have suffered for a little while.’ The subject he has been discussing is the suffering for being identified as a Christian. He had said that, it is not a disgrace to suffer as a Christian. The world may do disgraceful things and speak shamefully of you but there is no disgrace in this ultimately—it is God who vindicates his own. We trust him.

I note with you that the scriptures do not speak of suffering as if it is nothing. There is no hint that suffering is to be regarded as ‘no big deal.’ Suffering is precisely that—it is suffering. You aren’t imagining it. We are not required to call difficulties blessings. When the Apostle says that you are blessed if reviled for Jesus’ name, he is not advocating stirring up animosity so you can feel blessed. No. Being reviled feels like being reviled with all its unpleasantness. He says that such unpleasantness does not place you outside God’s grace.

There are other things that cause suffering in our lives. The unrelieved health challenge; the relationship that won’t be restored; the economic reversal that blindsided us. The gospel never calls us to say that painful things aren’t painful. We do find in the midst of such things that our Lord restores, supports, strengthens, and establishes. Often this restoration is partial in this life of mortality; even so, every restoration points forward, witnessing that a greater work is underway; the work that looks forward to that future when his redeeming work will be consummated and all will be complete.

In speaking of suffering in this way, the Apostle Peter wants his hearers to always keep in mind that suffering is never an indication that you have fallen outside the purview of this narrative that Jesus is writing about your life. Even our suffering is gathered up in this story and set right/resolved in Jesus Christ. You will notice as well, that in God’s care and keeping it isn’t suffering that lasts, rather it is the eternal glory of Christ that lasts.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.