

“For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls”

Reflection 32 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Peter’s First Letter is first of all about being Christian in a pagan society, a cosmopolitan society, no doubt, educated and sophisticated but still pagan, for as we can see in our time it’s possible to be both sophisticated and pagan. I would note then, at least in passing, that 1 Peter is about not just blending in, and not just acting, and living and thinking and deciding like everyone else. So as we face decisions and life choices, individually and collectively, there is a point in the process early on when we must ask: What is it in this decision, in this life choice, that marks me as a disciple of Jesus? Or am I just making the same decision – buying the house, divorcing the spouse – I would have made if Jesus had never come?

1 Peter is about not blending in. And it’s about facing trials, and especially the anger and ridicule and taunting and skepticism of those who do not believe. It’s about for a little while suffering grief in all kinds of trials so that your faith may be proved genuine, the real thing (1 Peter 1:6-7). So 1 Peter is about hard times. And you would therefore expect Peter to begin with condolences, with sympathy, with words of comfort. Instead look at how he begins! And incidentally much of chapter 1, all the way from verse 3 through at least verse 10, maybe verse 12, is in Greek one long run-on sentence. These words and truths are tumbling forth, coming from the deepest place in Peter’s heart.

Peter begins in 1 Peter 1:3-12 with celebration: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! This is great! Praise God! We’re born again. We’re starting over. Resurrection courses through our minds and souls and bodies. We have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. It can never be ravaged, or polluted or defiled. Through faith we are shielded by God’s power. Nothing can get to us. In fact, that’s what these trials are about: to prove the authenticity, the reality, of this faith. So we – even in trial – are filled with inexpressible joy. This is great! This is amazing! This is what the prophets wanted in on. It was this they were always talking about.

And so we see that Peter’s horizon stretches now to resurrection, to “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade kept in heaven for [us]” (verse 4). He anticipates “the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (verse 5). He looks to a time “when Jesus Christ is revealed” (verse 7). And then he writes in verses 8-9, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

In this text then – so future-oriented – salvation is still seen as a present reality: “For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” And that word *soul*, that concept *soul*, *nephesh* in Hebrew, *psuche* or *psyche* in Greek, refers to the most vital part of our being, our life force, our inner life, our true personhood, our self, who we are really at our best meant to be. For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. You are attaining your true personhood. And that is salvation, the feeling, the confidence that we are who we are

meant to be, and we are doing what we are meant to do, and we are heading where we are meant to go.

But notice how in this context, “salvation of your souls” is received – through grief in all kinds of trials, so your faith – of greater worth than gold – may be proved genuine, or later in this same chapter, now in verses 22-23, “Now having purified your souls by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again through the living and enduring word of God.” And what is the result of this all? Inexpressible and glorious joy (verse 8).

Consequently Peter, as did so many of these first-generation Christians, indeed as do spiritual people of all times and places, has found a state of grace called trust where we find a power for living we never had before, where we can live life no longer stalled out by fear and anxiety. We’ve been through the trials. We’ve walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Peter has found a state of grace called trust where we can find peace in the midst of change and conflict and controversy, an inner calm when even the most outrageous things happen, a solid confidence whatever our circumstances. He’s found a state of grace called trust where things do not have to go our way, where people need not conform to what we want, and still we will be free to remain lovingly attentive to them and their neediness; where we can find healing for the broken places inside us; where we can find the courage to do what is right regardless of the consequences; where we can find the inner strength to be kind to the unkind, to be loving to the unloving and the seemingly unlovable, to forgive those who we feel may have wronged us and who, in fact, may have. He’s found a state of grace called trust where even when life is at its most tragic we can still see God redemptively at work; where we acquire over time the assurance that nothing truly good is ever impossible, that whatever it is that needs to be done will somehow be done, and that God is always giving us the resources and vision and people to see things through. He’s found a state of grace called trust where we will sense all around us the presence of God, our oneness with God, God filling us body and soul, God’s love pouring into us, joy and vitality pouring out of us, in Peter’s words, inexpressible and glorious joy, in the words of Jesus, a state called beatitude.

To this we are called. For this we were born – to find our way to this inexpressible and glorious joy, not the shallow happiness of this world that comes from getting our own way, a happiness that comes and goes, but this inexpressible, glorious, transcendent joy, and to live in and from this joy, more and more, all the time. This too is part of the salvation of our God. But the way forward is often through grief, through suffering grief in all kinds of trials. As Peter says, all this happens to you – all these trials – so that your faith may be proved genuine, so that you will know that you are born again, that you are a different, stronger, wiser person, born to a living hope with an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, filled with inexpressible joy.

In life you may lose much. Doors close. But often the doors close to keep us from being trapped in rooms that can never satisfy us as God can.

– Dale Pauls