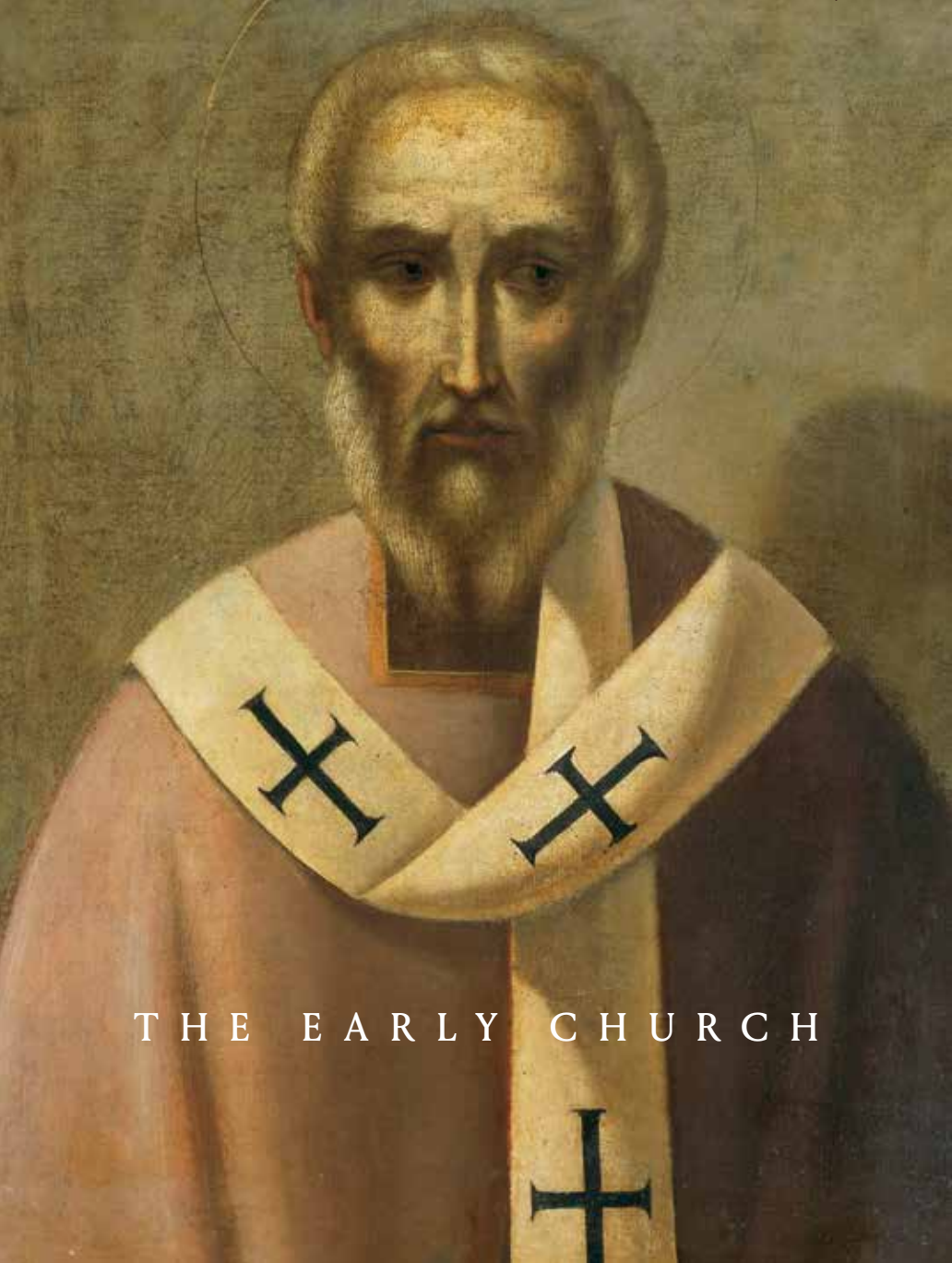


TABLETALK

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THE EARLY CHURCH

Lessons from the First Christians

THE EARLY CHURCH HAS A CERTAIN GLOW about it. The Apostles were still alive. Pentecost had just happened. The gospel of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection was new. Believers joined the church in droves despite regular persecution, held everything in common, and devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer (Acts 2:42–44). Christianity was fresh, and the Spirit was moving as the Word did its work (19:20).

But if we glorify the early church without seeing the full picture, we miss something important. There were real problems. The religious establishment that had opposed Jesus extended its persecution to His followers, forcing the early Christians to scatter beyond Judea (Acts 8:1–4). Sexual immorality plagued Corinth (1 Cor. 5). False teaching infected Galatia (Gal. 1:6–7). Christians struggled to define themselves against the Judaism out of which the church had been born (Col. 2:16–17).

The picture, in other words, is complicated. And our tendency is to simplify complicated things. We want either to dismiss the early church for its problems or to hail it as a golden age that we need to recover. But maturity resists that impulse. Both realities are true at once: The early church was messy, and it was glorious. There is much to imitate and much to learn from—both in what people got right and in what they got wrong.

What stands out most to me, though, is the early church's simplicity. These believers didn't have shelves of theology books. The New Testament was still being written. When Paul's letters circulated, they were read aloud to the whole congregation (Col. 4:16), and listeners carried that word with them through the week. The early church was less occupied than we are today with maintaining programs, systems, and institutions. These things aren't bad, but they can be distracting. From elders to laypeople, their questions were direct: How do we love one another? How do we live faithfully? How do we carry the gospel to the next city?

These are the very questions that the New Testament answers. The concerns of the modern church aren't trivial, but the danger is when inessential matters distract from Christianity's beating heart: Jesus Christ, who saves sinners and gives His life so that we might live. We have been crucified with Him, and it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us (Gal. 2:20). Walking by the Spirit requires daily dependence on His person and work (Gal. 5:16) and devoting ourselves to the Word, to the church, and to prayer (Acts 2:42–44). Does that describe our lives? 

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What Is the Early Church?

DANIEL HAMES

The phrase *the early church* is a slightly slippery one. What counts as *early*?

In one sense, the church began in the garden of Eden, and the history of the very earliest church is recorded for us in Genesis. Usually, though, what we mean is the story of the followers of Christ from Pentecost onward. The very first part of the story in this postincarnation chapter is the going out of the disciples from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of

the earth, Paul's missionary journeys, and the preaching of the Apostles perhaps as far abroad as Spain and India.

As the Apostolic generation handed the baton on to the next generation, the story of the church wound through evangelistic discussions with Jews and pagans, a complex relationship with the Roman Empire, and the building of doctrinal consensus in the face of false teaching. By around the year 600, the church had seen five ecumenical councils, which found wide agreement

on theological questions including the Trinity and the deity of Christ. It had the canon of Scripture as we know it today, and Christians had largely established patterns of worship and church government. This is often known as the *patristic era*.

Within this period, it is helpful to focus on the time from the first century until AD 325 as the *early church*. The year 325 was a milestone moment for the church. It was marked by the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (in modern-day Turkey), with bishops attending from all over the world. They were responding to the threat of the Arian heresy and did so with a strong, united voice. This theological unity was made all the more poignant because of recent history. From around AD 250, Christians had experienced waves of brutal persecution in the Roman Empire, but this council was convened and hosted by Constantine, Rome's first Christian emperor. The church had, for the first time, the imperial blessing on its gathering and thinking, and from then on it was knitted into Roman society and politics in a way that it had never known before.

ALL THE RAGE

In recent years, we have seen an effort to "retrieve" the theology of the medieval and patristic eras, leading many to a richer understanding of the faith. Yet even those first three hundred years of church history offer us a bewildering array of biblical commentaries, theological and apologetic works, hymns, and liturgy. We meet the likes of Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian and face heresies such as Gnosticism and Marcionism. We encounter everything from solid exegesis to poor exegesis, from moving martyrdoms to disturbing anti-Judaism, from heroic stands for the faith to creeping clericalism. What

do we make of it all, and how do we assess it with wisdom and faithfulness?

It's wise to have in mind two potential mistakes and to guard against both.

GOLDEN AGE?

The early church can seem like a mystical golden age that we might wish we could somehow recover. It seems to be a time when the church was unified and growing, and it was within mere generations of the Lord's earthly life. We wonder what it would have been like to sit at the feet of the Apostle John, as Polycarp of Smyrna did, or, in turn, to learn from Polycarp, as Irenaeus of Lyons did. Even Christians who don't spend their time reading theological books can get sentimental at the thought of becoming "an Acts 2 church," as though things were automatically somehow more perfect the further back in history we go.

But earlier is not necessarily better. The New Testament has copious evidence of this. Mass conversions, healthy congregations, and even the penning of inerrant and Spirit-inspired writings did not make the Apostles perfect Christians, as we see in the Gospels. False teaching could tear through the church, even taking in those who had known the Lord personally (Gal. 2:11; 1 John 2:19). This means that we must tread carefully and keep our antennae up for danger as we explore.

To read the works of early-church writers can be enlightening and encouraging to any believer. But these texts are not inerrant like Scripture and do not have divine authority over us as Scripture does. An early-church writing is not some sort of extension of Apostolic inspiration and authority simply by being close in time to Christ. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a book

that was well loved by many early Christians, is fascinating to read but would be a pastoral disaster if put into practice. Ignatius of Antioch bravely went to his death for Christ's sake but also seemed to teach an unquestioning obedience to bishops.

We ought not to romanticize the early church or imagine that recovering it would deal with all of today's problems in a flash. It was far more complex and flawed than that.

CAGE STAGE?

Reading early-church theology can be enchanting. It feels like uncovering deep roots that run right back to the time of the Apostles. Sadly, this has led some (many of them young men) to depart to Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism, which each claim to be the only "true" church, in contrast to what can feel like "shallow" evangelicalism. This trend can make us overly guarded. Wary pastors may warn their people about getting entangled in early writers who have contributed to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the veneration of Mary, or muddiness on justification. Simply pulling up the drawbridge like this is as much a mistake as the naivete of the first error.

It is true that the early church was deeply imperfect, and it can seem all the more alien to us since people in second-century Greece or Asia Minor simply did not think like we do today. Yet we should not dismiss all interest in the early church as a minefield of pagan incursions on the gospel or Roman Catholicism in disguise. In the very earliest days of the church, we will also find wonderful stands for gospel truth, pastor-theologians shepherding their flocks with great integrity, and a heart for mission that propelled the gospel around the world.

It's to the early Christians that we owe

some of the most beautiful expressions of our faith. Think of the majestic lines about the identity of Jesus Christ from the Nicene Creed:

[We believe in] one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.

Or this gorgeous hymn about the atonement from the *Epistle to Diognetus*:

He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for those who are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!

Clearly, there are riches to enjoy here, and going "cage stage" or locking down against the thought and history of the early church would be a great loss of our own heritage.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "every age has its own outlook" and is both good at seeing



certain truths and liable to make its own "characteristic mistakes." Getting to know the early church can teach us by correction and by way of a warning. We should tread carefully, but we may tread on nonetheless. The Holy Spirit was at work in Christ's church then as He is now, and there is so much to appreciate. With His help and

armed with the truth of Scripture, let us take up and read. **11**

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The Apostles and the Apostolic Church

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER

While Jesus' primary purpose was to die for our sins on the cross, a secondary purpose was training the Twelve. The primary mission was accomplished, and our salvation procured, when Jesus died, was buried, and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The secondary purpose was accomplished when Jesus, having trained the Twelve for more than three years, commissioned them after the resurrection to go and disciple the

nations (Matt. 28:18–20) and to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins in His name (Luke 24:47). Jesus sent the Apostles out as the Father had previously sent Him (John 20:21–22) so that they could serve as faithful representatives, heralds, and ambassadors of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:20). This article will survey the Apostolic ministry of preaching and planting churches and discuss how the Apostles established a church whose authority is grounded primarily in the Word and the Spirit.

THE MEANING OF APOSTLE

The term *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning “messenger.” The noun *apostle*, in turn, is derived from the verb *apostellō*, which means “to send.” Jesus, for His part, is the paradigmatic Sent One (John 9:7). John's gospel depicts Jesus as the One who was sent from God the Father (e.g., 3:16–17; 5:36–37) while being Himself God (1:1; 10:30; 20:28). Before Jesus' coming, God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus (1:6). After Jesus' ascension, God the Father and Jesus jointly sent the Holy Spirit to empower the Apostles to continue Jesus' mission and to fill those who placed their trust in Jesus (14:26; 16:7). Finally, in tandem with the witness of the Spirit, the Apostles were sent on their mission (15:26–27; Acts 1:8).

THE APPOINTMENT OF THE TWELVE

After spending the night in prayer, Jesus appointed the Twelve, the men who would serve as His preeminent messengers and form the nucleus of His new messianic community, the church. Apostolic lists are found in each of the Synoptic Gospels as well as in Acts (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:14–16; Acts 1:13). While there are slight variations in order, the Twelve (given in the form of six pairs) included:

- ▶ Simon Peter and his brother Andrew;
- ▶ James and John the sons of Zebedee;
- ▶ Philip and Bartholomew (also known as Nathanael);
- ▶ Thomas and Matthew (the tax collector);
- ▶ James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot;
- ▶ Judas son of James (also known as

Thaddaeus) and Judas Iscariot (the betrayer).

While the word *apostolos* originally referred to any messenger, with Jesus' appointment of the Twelve the word took on technical force by designating the Twelve whom Jesus had chosen. It is these Twelve (minus Judas Iscariot, later replaced by Matthias; Acts 1:26), supplemented by Paul, Barnabas, and James, Jesus' half-brother (Acts 14:4, 14; Gal. 1:19), who received Jesus' commission and spearheaded the early Christian mission as Jesus' authorized and empowered witnesses. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote that the Apostles, along with the prophets, formed the foundation of the New Testament church, with Jesus Christ Himself being the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

THE APOSTLE PETER

Jesus had previously stated that He would establish His messianic community (*ekklēsia*, used in a nontechnical, pre-Pentecost sense) upon the rock of Peter's confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16–18), but not on Peter as the first pope. After all, Peter was married (as were the other Apostles and half-brothers of Jesus; 1 Cor. 9:5) and not infallible (Gal. 2:11–12). In keeping with Jesus' words, Peter was given the “keys of the kingdom” (Matt. 16:19). Accordingly, he preached the sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41) and was dispatched to authenticate the reception of the Spirit by the Samaritans (8:14–17) and the gentile Cornelius (10:1–11:18). Later, the leaders gathered at the Jerusalem Council affirmed that the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ operates by grace through faith apart from

works (15:1–29), and this was the gospel that Paul consistently proclaimed (e.g., Rom. 1:16–17; 3:21–26; Eph. 2:8–9).

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The ninth chapter of the book of Acts recounts Paul's conversion by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. The story is told three times in Acts and marks a pivotal juncture in the rise of the early Christian movement (Acts 9:1–19; 22:1–21; 26:1–23). Paul called himself an “untimely” Apostle (1 Cor. 15:8) because he had been persecuting the early Christians when Jesus draft-

ed him into service (Acts 7:58; 8:3; 9:1–2). Paul's mission, first to the Jews (preaching in local synagogues) but beyond them to gentiles (non-Jews; see Rom. 1:16), entailed the establishment of local congregations across the Greco-Roman empire. In three missionary journeys, he extended the reach of the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Rome (15:18–21), with further plans to travel to Spain (vv. 24, 28). In his letter openings, Paul always identified himself as an Apostle, a missionary and church planter who derived his authority from none other than the risen Christ (e.g., Gal.

1:1). Paul also identified himself as a herald (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11) who would enter a city, proclaim the gospel, plant a church, and then move on to the next urban center.

The book of Acts shows that the Apostolic proclamation focused on Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10). It narrates the irresistible progress of the gospel empowered by the Spirit (1:8). External obstacles (persecution) and internal obstacles (lying to the Holy Spirit, the need to clarify the essence of the gospel) were no match for the Spirit's power (5:1–11; 15:1–35). As churches were established, Paul and his associates appointed elders in every local congregation (14:23; Titus 1:5). This plurality of leaders was built on the precedent of local Jewish synagogues (e.g., Acts 18:7–8, 19).

ELDERS AND DEACONS

In his letters to his Apostolic delegates, Timothy and Titus, Paul stipulated requirements for church leaders, both elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1:6–9). Elders are to be faithful husbands (if married, which was the norm; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6), in keeping with the biblical pattern of male leadership seen from Adam to the patriarchs and in national deliverers and priests and kings, culminating in Jesus' being incarnated as a man, and the twelve male Apostles.

The elders (*presbyteroi*) or overseers (*episkopoi*)—the two terms are used synonymously in the New Testament (see Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; 5:17; Titus 1:6–9)—must manage their households well, since the family is the basic societal unit and microcosm of the church, God's household (1 Tim. 3:4–5, 15). They must be spiritually mature men who exhibit proven character (see the requirements in 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9

pertaining to a man's integrity, control of temper, etc.). Elders must also be “able to teach” (*didaktikos*, 1 Tim. 3:2). While not all will teach as their primary role, all “rule”—that is, provide authoritative oversight for the church (5:17). Likewise, deacons are to be of mature character; theirs is a servant (not teaching or ruling) role (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8–12).

THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

With the death of the last Apostle (most likely John) around the close of the first century AD, the Apostolic era ceased. The period of Apostolic “signs and wonders,” performed in the absence of a finalized New Testament canon of writings, gave way to the completed and closed canon of sixty-six books consisting of thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament books. While Paul stipulated a set of two offices—elders/overseers and deacons—the authority of the church is grounded primarily in the Word and the Spirit, not passed on through lines of Apostolic succession. We still have the same Word today, just as we have the same Spirit as the One who indwelt the first Christians and empowered the Apostolic mission. Serving our risen Lord in our day, we are writing a new chapter in the church's history as we seek to fulfill His commission to disciple the nations and await His triumphant return. ■

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The Ministry of the Earliest Fathers

NICHOLAS NEEDHAM



nce the Apostles had departed from this earthly scene, theological leadership in the church passed to a body of men known collectively as the *early church fathers*. Many of their writings have survived for us to read today.

The first generation of the early church fathers are known as the *Apostolic fathers*. The name was coined at a time when it was thought that these men had direct contact with the Apostles. It is now thought that

only a few of them enjoyed this privilege. Readers find, when studying these Apostolic fathers (men such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna), that they generally lack the theological vision and creativity that we have come to expect of theologians. Their theology often reads like a plodding enunciation of obvious biblical truths and endless quotations from the New Testament without necessarily any profound penetration into its meaning.

This is not, however, to deny that many noble and beautiful things are found in this first generation of Christian writers. One of the most exalted productions of this period is the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*, perhaps written in the first half of the second century. The *Epistle* contains meditations on the work of Christ that have thrilled and enchanted readers up to the present day:

God revealed how His love had such a regard for the human race that He did not hate us, or thrust us away, or charge our sin against us, but showed great long-suffering and bore with us. He Himself took upon Himself the burden of our sins; He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the Holy One for transgressors, the Blameless One for the wicked, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, the Imperishable One for the perishing, the Immortal One for mortals. For what else could cover our sins except His righteousness? Who else could have justified wicked and ungodly people like us, except the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable work! O blessings that surpass all expectation! A single Righteous One has swallowed up the wickedness of many; the righteousness of One has justified a multitude of transgressors!

When we come to the closing decades of the second century, we meet the first genuinely great theologian among the early church fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons (flourished c. 175–95). Irenaeus' magnum opus was his *Against Heresies*, a lengthy work written against Gnosticism. Within that context, Irenaeus developed a strongly Christocentric theology in which Christ

is simultaneously God incarnate and the second Adam who reverses the calamity brought about in the first Adam.

We could call Irenaeus' outlook a *two-Adams theology*. The first Adam was relatively childlike and showed his weakness in succumbing to satanic temptation. All humanity was implicated in his fall. But the second Adam, both human and divine, resisted where the first had yielded and progressively undid the character and consequences of Adam's sin by lifelong holiness and obedience. Irenaeus saw Christ's lifelong obedience as having a twofold significance: It sanctified human nature at every stage (from childhood onward) and—through obedience unto the death of the cross—paid the debt of human sin on humanity's behalf.

He did away with the results of human disobedience that came, in the beginning, through the fruit of a tree. He did this by becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Thus, He set things right again after the disobedience that took place through a tree, and He did it through the obedience He accomplished on a tree. Hereby He clearly manifested God Himself, the One we had offended in the First Adam, when Adam disobeyed the divine command. In the Second Adam, however, we are reconciled and made obedient even unto death.

Many of the other theologians of the second century come into the category of "apologists"—defenders of Christianity against the various misunderstandings and misrepresentations that clustered around it in the minds of pagans. Among the great apologists were Aristides, Anaxagoras,

Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, and Justin Martyr. Their true influence was not so much in persuading pagans as in helping to strengthen their fellow Christians in their sense of the truth and the rightness of the faith they professed. When believers read the apologists, they probably came away feeling that faith required no loss of intellectual or moral integrity.

Justin Martyr deserves a special mention among the second-century apologists, simply because he has left us a fairly full account of how Christians worshiped in that immediately post-Apostolic age. Modern readers might be struck by two features of this worship:

1. The strong emphasis on Sunday, “the first day of the week” (John 20:1), as the proper day of worship, set apart and hallowed by Christ’s resurrection on this day. Justin fashions an intimate connection between the first day of the week in the Genesis creation account, when God said, “Let there be light,” and the day of the Savior’s resurrection, when in a far deeper and more significant way God once again said, “Let there be light!” For when Christ rose from death, He vanquished and dispelled the darkness of the tomb. This day, Justin observes, is therefore universally kept among the churches as the day of worship.

2. The central place given to the Lord’s Supper in early Christian worship. It was not relegated to an add-on every few months. It was integral to the worship every Sunday. Justin also records that the supper was understood as in some way conveying Christ’s body and blood to the faithful. He does not describe the “mechanics” of how this works; he simply sets it forth as a thing most surely believed. In the Reformed tradition, Justin’s belief is

preserved by the careful wording of Westminster Confession of Faith 29.7.

At the end of the second century and on into the early third, the eloquent and fiery Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155–220) impacted like a huge meteor the theology of Latin-speaking Christians. His writing was prolific; it was particularly influential in helping Christians articulate the fundamentals of belief in the Trinity and the incarnation. This is not to say that Tertullian got everything right (his Trinitarianism was primitive compared to the precision of the Nicene Creed). But he asked the right questions, pointed in the right direction, and coined some enduring terminology. To Tertullian the church owes the terms *Trinitas* (Trinity), *persona* (person), and *substantia* (substance), which became pivotal in Latin theology.

Tertullian is a fascinating figure. Though he helped shape Latin theology so deeply, the later church refused to give him the titles of “saint” or “father.” This was owing to Tertullian’s ardent sympathy with a schismatic movement known as Montanism (the charismatics, so to speak, of the second century). He used hard words against nonsympathizers. Tertullian is a case study in how a theologian can be both right and wrong.

At around the same time as Tertullian’s ministry in the Latin West, the Greek East saw the life and work of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215). Clement in some ways was the opposite of Tertullian—gentle where Tertullian was fiery, unsympathetic to Montanism, and (in particular) optimistic about finding truth among the Greek philosophers. Tertullian famously set reason and revelation in antithesis: “What has Athens to do

with Jerusalem?” (Athens, the cradle of Western philosophy, here stood for human reason’s efforts in the pagan mind at comprehending reality.)

Clement, by contrast, saw the activity of the Logos—the second person of the Trinity conceived in terms of “cosmic reason”—as pervading all creation. It was almost inevitable that the philosophers, attuning themselves to reason, would glimpse some of the light of the Logos. (Clement referred to “the noble and half-inspired Plato.”) We may, however, think that Clement stated this view with dubious force when he claimed that what the Law and the Prophets were to the Jews, philosophy was to the Greeks.

Clement’s theology and spirituality were summed up in his three great treatises, *Exhortation to the Greeks* (a work of apologetics), *The Tutor* (an instruction manual for the new Christian), and *Stromata*. The last title literally means “carpetbags” and is a strange treatise that seems deliberately to meander all over the place, as Clement offers his view of the ideal Christian.

So often, under the providence of
God, we stand on the shoulders of
those who went before us.

Clement’s greatest work may have been to set the stage in Alexandria for the far more impactful ministry of his pupil Origen (c. 185–253). But that takes us beyond the chronological limits of this article.

Perhaps we can summarize the life and work of the earliest fathers of the church in the following way. After the Apostles laid the church’s foundation, these fathers shaped the basic moral and theological outlook that would enable the church to meet the unprecedented challenges of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. The ministry of Cyprian, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, and Augustine is unthinkable without the work of their predecessors in the faith. So often, under the providence of God, we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. 

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Contending for the Faith

J. V. FESKO

“**T**hough with a scornful wonder // men see her sore oppressed, // by schisms rent asunder, // by heresies distressed,” are powerful words of the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation” that describe the present state of the church. Ever since the serpent slithered into the garden sanctuary and hissed, “Yea, hath God said . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1, KJV), the church has had to combat false teaching. In the Old Testament, God warned the Israelites against the teach-

ing of false prophets and idolatry (Deut. 18:9–22). The prophet Elijah dueled with the prophets of Baal to prove the falsehood of their claims and defend the truth that the Lord was Israel’s one true God (1 Kings 18:20–40). In the New Testament no less than in the Old, the church had to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The Apostle Paul, for example, rebuked the Galatian churches, saying, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in

the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6).

So if the church had to contend for the faith in both the Old and New Testaments, it should not surprise us that the early church had to man the ramparts of truth and defend the faith against false teaching. Four primary challenges to orthodoxy arose in the lies of Docetism, Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. Broadly, each of these false teachings represents an effort to displace the authority of God’s inerrant and infallible Word. They directly challenged the claims and sufficiency of Scripture. More specifically, Docetism tried to undermine the doctrine of Christ, and Gnosticism questioned the goodness of creation. And while we might bemoan the fact that these false teachings arose in the early church, the challenge of false doctrine produced a benefit—it caused the church to define and demarcate doctrinal truth. The church gained a better understanding of Scripture’s teaching, a benefit that continues to endure to the present day.

DOCETISM

Ever since the fall, all of redemptive history was working toward the revelation of the seed of the woman, the One who would redeem the people of God from their sin (Gen. 3:15). The Apostle John echoes the opening lines of Genesis when he writes of the eternal Son of God, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Word, the Son of God, is fully equal with God. In the words of the Nicene Creed, He is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” Yet, marvel of marvels, John also reports, “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John

1:14, author’s translation). The Son of God became man—a flesh-and-blood human being. Paul writes in a famous Christ-hymn: “Christ, . . . who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:5–7). In the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, “Our Lord Jesus Christ is . . . the self-same perfect in Godhead, the self-same perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man.” The Scriptures teach the full and complete divinity and humanity of the Son. In the simplest of terms, the eternal Son of God became incarnate as a finite human being.

Just as in the garden of Eden, however, the serpent slithered into the sanctuary of the church and hissed, “Hath God truly become man?” False teachers called Docetists questioned the incarnation of Christ. *Docetism* is a word that comes from the Greek word *dokeō*, which means “to appear.” In other words, Docetists denied the incarnation of Christ; they claimed that the Son of God only appeared to be incarnate—His birth and death were illusions. The Apostle John faced early, nascent forms of Docetism, which caused him to write:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it. (1 John 1:1–2)

John stressed the reality of the incarnation—the Apostles had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands the incarnate Son of God. The incarnation was no mere phantasm or illusion. In his

letter to the Smyrnaeans (c. 110), Ignatius of Antioch warned his recipients against the Docetists, whom he called “beasts in the shape of men.” He wrote, “If the Lord were in the body in appearance only, and were crucified in appearance only, then am I also bound in appearance only.” In other words, Ignatius knew that he was bodily bound by sin and needed an incarnate Savior to redeem him body and soul. Ignatius instructed the Smyrnaeans to pray for the repentance of the Docetists but also warned the church against this heresy.

GNOSTICISM

Docetism denied the reality of the incarnation and, in this respect, shared a key tenet of another early-church heresy—namely, Gnosticism. The term *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnōsis*, which means “knowledge.” This was a label that the church gave to the heretical sect that believed that salvation came only to a certain elite class of people who had secret, hidden knowledge. They were Gnostics, or those who were “in the know.” While there were a wide array of teachings associated with Gnosticism, there were chief characteristics common to the movement that were antithetical to the Christian faith. Gnostics believed that the ultimate form of being was spiritual—that is, nonmaterial. Before the creation, there had been a battle among spiritual beings that created a rift in the spirit world that led to the creation of an inferior material world. Since the material world is inferior and even in some sense evil, salvation consists in deliverance from material, embodied existence.

Incipient forms of Gnosticism began to arise in the Apostolic church, and the Apostle Paul wrote against them:

Why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:20–23)

In other words, Christians were being taught that the body is evil and should thus be denied care and sustenance—freeing the soul from the material body is all that truly matters. Paul refuted this error by reminding the church at Colossae that such anti-body regulations had the appearance of godliness but in truth were contrary to the gospel. God saves only through the gift of faith and the work of Christ, not by denying the body good things, such as food and drink—good things that God has created and given to humans as gifts.

Theologians of the early church continued the fight against Gnosticism, especially Irenaeus of Lyons in his work *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus specifically mentions the teachings of the Gnostic heretic Valentinus as an “abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.” He explains how Valentinus promoted the false doctrine that there was a preexistent Aeon, an eternal unbegotten, invisible being, who dwelled in the company of other beings who produced another being called *Nous*, whom they called *Monogenes* (only begotten) and Father, the Beginning of All Things. These beings sent forth emanations, or subdeities, who eventually created the material world as we know it. Irenaeus held these false teachings up to the light of Scripture and concluded, “Such, then, is



their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge.” Like the serpent in the garden, the Gnostics questioned the teaching of Scripture and twisted it to their own ends. Irenaeus countered Gnostic heresy with the simple truths of Scripture:

The Church... has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea,

and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God.

MARCIONISM

The tides of Docetism and Gnosticism arguably coalesce around AD 130 in the false teaching of Marcion, a wealthy shipbuilder who lived in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Marcion traveled to Rome and gave a large sum of money to the church so that he would be allowed to teach. The church

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studied his teachings, rejected them, and returned Marcion's money to him. Although his writings are no longer extant, we know of his beliefs from the work *Against Marcion*, written by the church father Tertullian. Marcion taught that there were two gods: the creator and the redeemer. The creator god appears in the Old Testament, and the redeemer god appears in the New Testament. The Old Testament god is evil, and the New Testament god is loving and good. Jesus comes on the scene in the New Testament to destroy the Law and the Prophets through His work, though He only appeared to suffer and die. Because he saw the New Testament as antithetical to the Old Testament, Marcion created his own cut-and-paste Bible in which he stripped the New Testament of any references to the Old Testament. In line with Gnostic teachings, Marcion also taught that sexual relations were sinful, he replaced wine with water for the Lord's Supper, and he forbade

the consumption of any foods produced by sexual reproduction. Thus, meat and milk were forbidden. According to Marcion, people were saved by God's grace and were not under the law in any sense, since the law was part of the Old Testament. To say the least, Marcion's beliefs run completely contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

Like the serpent twisting God's words to his own ends, Marcion warped the Word of God to promote his own heretical views. Tertullian, for example, stresses that Marcion could arrive at his views only by "mutilating" Luke's gospel. To counter the two-gods claim of Marcion, Tertullian teaches that there is one God: "God is not, if He is not one." Here Tertullian echoes Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." In the third book of his *Against Marcion*, Tertullian goes to great lengths to prove from Scripture that Christ is the Son of God who created the world, whose advent was prophesied, and who was incarnate in the flesh. In other words, the advent of Christ is unintelligible apart from the Old Testament. How can one understand the fulfillment of the promises of Christ unless he first knows what has been promised? The Old Testament is promise, and the New Testament is fulfillment. They are a necessary pair. Why else, for example, would the gospels of Matthew and Luke trace Christ's lineage back to Abraham and Adam (Matt. 1:1; Luke 3:38)?

Irenaeus also joined the fray against Marcion and stressed that the Apostles taught that there were two Testaments and that the same God had appointed both Testaments for the salvation of Jews and gentiles. In fact, Christ's work was necessary to undo the disobedience of Adam. Irenaeus rested the unity of the two Testaments in the unity of God, the sole mediatorship

of Christ, and redemption through faith in the gospel as the only way of salvation. The whole Old Testament looked forward to Christ's advent.

Because of the false teachings of Marcion, the church eventually defined the canon of Scripture to ensure that false teachers could neither sideline inspired books of the canon nor add uninspired words to the Bible.

MONTANISM

Montanism originated from the teaching of Montanus, who with two female companions, Priscilla and Maximilla, started a prophetic movement around the 150s. The movement spread through Asia Minor, to Rome, and eventually throughout North Africa. Montanists believed that prophecy and possession of spiritual gifts were the true signs of genuine Christianity. Montanus claimed that the promised Paraclete (Helper or Comforter) of John 14:16; 15:26; and 16:7 spoke exclusively through him. Later defenders of the faith quoted Montanus as saying that he in fact was the promised Paraclete. Montanists promoted strict asceticism, and because of this, they even for a time swept up prominent Christian leaders such as Tertullian into their movement. That Montanus claimed to give direct divine deliverances naturally challenged the position of the Scriptures as the sole authority in the life and doctrine of the church.

Eusebius of Caesarea refuted Montanism in his *Ecclesiastical History* as a novelty that promoted false prophecy that was tearing the church apart. According to Eusebius, Montanus was a man obsessed with ambition and began "raving, chattering, and speaking nonsense, prophesying contrary to church tradition and custom from the beginning." People were led astray because

they failed to recognize that Montanus' so-called prophecies contradicted the inspired Word of God. In short, Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla uttered the words of the serpent, "Hath God said?" Rather than pointing people toward the Word of God, they pointed people to themselves. The church rejected their efforts and stood on the firm foundation of the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

Surveying the history of these early-church heresies might at first seem discouraging. Even in the post-Apostolic church's infancy, the enemy was trying to drown it in a flood of lies and deception. But whether in the early church or in the present day, we must always remember the words of Christ: "The gates of hell shall not prevail" against the church (Matt. 16:18). While darkness may seek to envelop the truth, our triune God always shines the light of revelation through His Word to meet and overcome the darkness. As our forefathers contended for the faith once delivered to the saints, so we should pray that our faithful Lord would enable us to be faithful to Him. In the words of the well-known hymn:

*'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace forevermore;
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.'* **T**

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The Blood of the Martyrs

DAVID P. BARRY

Few of us grasp the cost of following Jesus in the early church. Before Nicaea, before Constantine, it took courage to be named with Jesus Christ. Many Christians lived with the daily fear of being accused or arrested. They could be denounced by a neighbor. They could be taken when they gathered for morning prayer. They could be taken as they walked to the market or at their place of work. There were no protections; in many cases, the state was the persecutor.

They could be brought before some official or dragged into an arena to be asked a simple but decisive question: Are you a Christian? To answer one way could lead to immediate release. They could go back to their lives, to their families. To answer truthfully would mean torture and death.

The pressure to deny the Lord was overwhelming. Sadly, some did deny Him. Many, however, proved faithful. At their final test, many gladly sacrificed their earthly home to cling to the building from God that is

made without hands (2 Cor. 5:1). They publicly confessed Christ and joined their souls with those of fellow martyrs under the altar. There they wait for the Judge to come (Rev 6:9–10).

Jesus warned His disciples. He prepared them for persecutions that would arise (Matt. 5:10–12; John 15:18–19). He told them that following Him could lead to serious division in their family (Matt. 10:35–36). It did not take long for His words to prove true. Not long after Jesus endured the cross, His disciples found crosses of their own. The book of Acts reports how James, the brother of John, was the first of the Apostles to be killed around AD 44 (Acts 12:2). Paul's letters report many of his sufferings for Jesus' sake (see 2 Cor. 11:16–12:10).

The first state-sponsored persecution began under Emperor Nero in AD 64 and lasted until his death in 68. Writing in the early second century (c. 120), the Roman historian Tacitus reports how it began. A great fire had burned much of Rome, and damaging rumors were swirling that Nero himself had ordered it started. He needed a scapegoat and quickly settled on the Christians. Tacitus writes:

To get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. . . . Arrest was first made of those who confessed; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of the hatred of the human race.

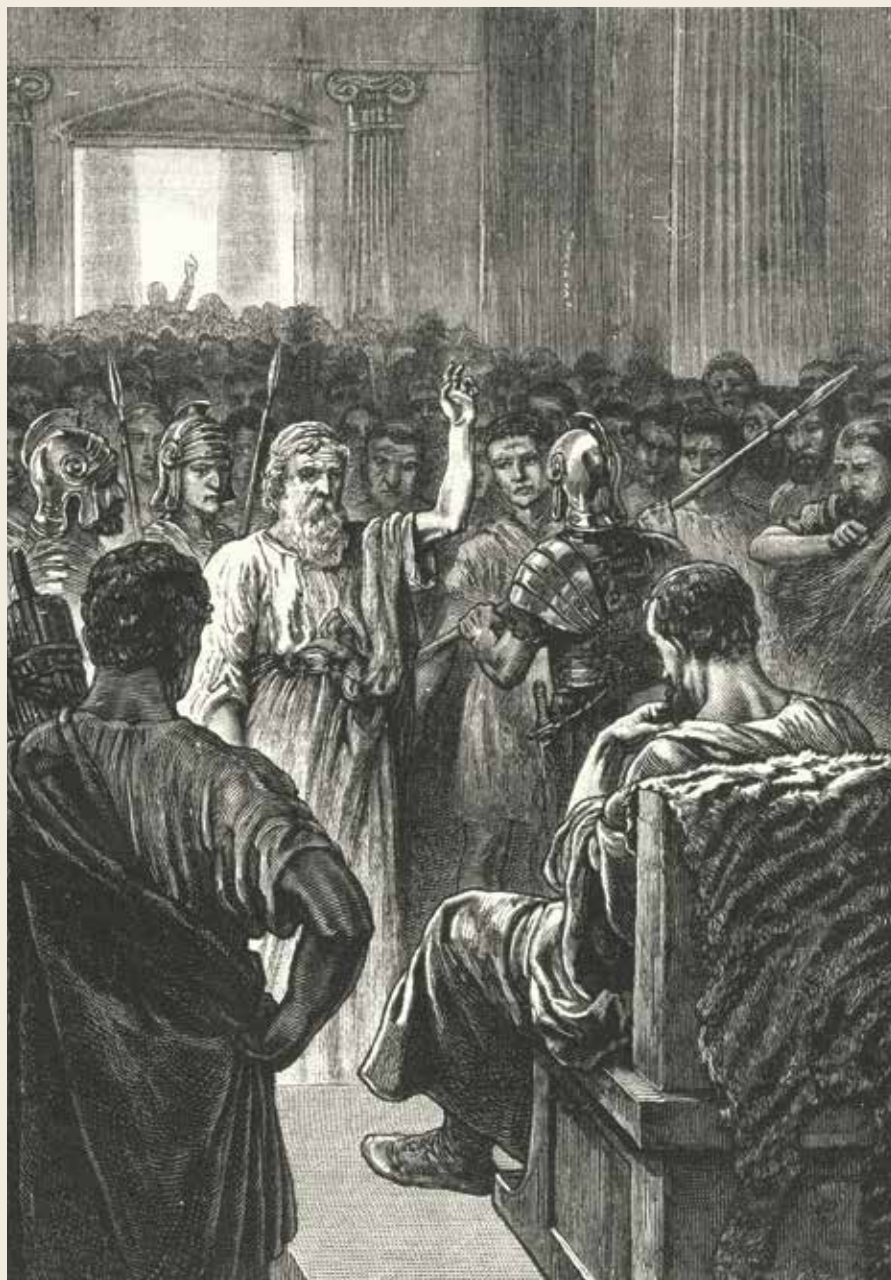
Tacitus was no friend of the Christians. But neither was the empire. Nero was cruel, but he knew what he was doing. He blamed

Christians because he knew that they had no support with the wider population.

Christians were despised because of a combination of reality and rumor. There were real grievances (if not good ones) fueling a popular hatred of Christianity. At the top of the list was the common charge that Christians were "atheists," meaning that they refused to bow to images of the Roman gods to worship them. Likewise, Christians refused to offer incense as emperor worship or to confess, "Caesar is Lord." At that time, the average Roman believed that the prosperity of the empire depended on placating the gods. So for a (growing) population of people to refuse to worship those gods, to deny their existence, or even to claim that—if the gods existed at all—they were demons was tantamount in the eyes of many Romans to wishing calamity or death on their neighbors.

There were also disruptions to pagan families that resulted from family members' converting to Christianity. As faith in Jesus took root in the empire, there was a growing undercurrent of anger in the populace that resulted from family strife. There were financial grievances as well. Tradesmen in the religious guild had suffered losses due to less activity in the temples and less purchasing of idols and other religious commodities (see the silversmiths' riot in Ephesus in Acts 19:28–34). Finally, from a social and cultural perspective, Christians' ethics were much stricter than those of other Romans. It's not hard to imagine why a society that celebrated public sexual immorality would label Christian chastity as "hatred."

Rampant rumors made things even worse. Popular hatred of Christians made negative stories more believable. So Christians were labeled as cannibals (because of eating the "body and blood" of Christ in the Lord's



"Hear My Free Confession, 'I Am a Christian'" (19th century).
Engraving, Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images

Supper). They were even accused of incest and other sexual perversions that went beyond what was acceptable among the Romans—a rumor, perhaps, that spun out of the Christian practice of calling one another “brother” or “sister” and greeting each other with a holy kiss (see 1 Thess. 5:26).

Nero found his scapegoat. But his mistreatment far exceeded what political expediency required. Tacitus continued:

Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to illuminate the night when daylight failed. . . . All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.

According to church tradition, both Peter and Paul were killed during Nero’s “extraordinary madness” (Eusebius). Yet as brutal as it was, the scope of the persecution was limited to the area around Rome. After Nero died, focused persecution slowed, but the antipathy remained.

The second state-sponsored persecution arose under Emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96. Not only was violence renewed, but Domitian’s campaign represented a developing imperial policy of repression against the fledgling Christian church. During the Domitian persecution, many Christians were killed or banished, reaching into the upper echelons of society. Even Domitian’s cousin, Flavius Clemens, was not spared. Both Clemens and his niece, Flavius Domitilla, were tried for “atheism”

and convicted. Clemens was put to death. Domitilla was banished. History remembers them only because of their high social status. Countless more Christians were killed, were banished, and had their property seized.

The circumstances for Christians in the empire became even worse in the third state-sponsored persecution, which occurred under Emperor Trajan (98–117). The early church was still generally despised. Under Trajan, however, it became common for members of the public to denounce Christians to local officials. Under Roman law, informants were rewarded from the personal assets of the guilty. Understandably, informants and anonymous accusers became common, so much so that around 111, a local official named Pliny the Younger in Bithynia (in modern-day Turkey) wrote a now-famous letter to Trajan asking what to do.

Pliny describes his practice of executing confirmed Christians, explaining that he “had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.” Trajan approved of putting known Christians to death but advised him not to look for them actively. When confirmed believers were found, however, Trajan required capital punishment. They could be saved, Trajan ordered, only if they proved that they were not Christians “by worshipping our gods.”

The next significant state-sponsored persecution came during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–80). After him, there were four more state-sponsored persecutions before Constantine’s Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in 313. There was a persecution under Septimius Severus (193–211). There was a persecution at the end of Decius’ reign

(249–51) around 250. There was another under Emperor Valerius (253–60). Finally, there was the so-called Great Persecution under Diocletian (284–305). All of these were terrible. Countless Christians had their assets seized or were banished or were conscripted to hard labor. Many denied Christ to save their lives. Many died. Until Constantine, it was never comfortable or safe to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Notwithstanding the pressure against it, the early church did not crumble or collapse. In fact, it thrived. The hatred and persecutions of a hostile society were not able to crush the early church's faith or its evangelistic efforts. The stories of two well-known martyrs, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, illustrate the effects of persecution on the early church.

Ignatius, the bishop of Syrian Antioch, was martyred during Trajan's regime (c. 108). Eusebius reports that he was arrested in Syria, taken to Rome, and "cast as food to wild beasts, on account of his testimony to Christ." During the journey from Syria, although he was in Roman custody, Ignatius had the opportunity to encourage many Christians along the way. As he was being taken to Rome, he wrote seven famous letters to different

**Jesus warned His
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churches to reassure them and embolden them in their faith. In his letter to the Romans, Ignatius even begged them not to intervene to stop his martyrdom. He wrote:

If you keep silent about me, I shall be a word of God, but if you are deeply concerned about my flesh I shall once again simply be a voice. Do not allow me anything other than being poured out for God.

Later he said:

I am writing to all the churches and I am instructing everyone that I am willingly dying for God, unless you prevent me. I beseech you, do not become an unseasonable kindness for me. Leave me to be bread for the beasts, through which I may be able to attain to God. . . . Beseech the Lord on my behalf, so that I may be found a sacrifice for God.

The church in Antioch set aside a day to remember Ignatius, and centuries later John Chrysostom preached a sermon on that day, comparing Ignatius' life and ministry to the sun, giving light to all who saw him. But Ignatius' death, Chrysostom said, was like a blazing sunset, in which the sun shines most brightly just before it is hidden. As he was concluding, Chrysostom then spoke about the power of the martyrs as gospel witnesses:

For in reality it is the greatest proof of the resurrection that the slain Christ should show forth so great power after death, as to persuade living men to despise both country and home and friends, and acquaintance and life itself, for the sake of confessing him, and to choose in place of present

pleasures, both stripes and dangers and death. For these are not the achievements of any dead man, nor of one remaining in the tomb but of one risen and living.

In life, Ignatius' faithfulness reached many. In death, however, he reached countless more.

The same is true of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who is probably the most well-known martyr of the early church. About fifty years after Ignatius was killed, Polycarp was arrested and martyred (c. 155). The account of his death is recorded in a letter that the church in Smyrna sent to the church in Philomelium to encourage them. That letter is now known as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

The church in Smyrna reports that its elderly bishop, Polycarp, knew that the authorities were looking for him. When they arrived at the house where he was, Polycarp let them in, spoke with the officers, and gave them food. He then asked for their permission to pray. When they gave it, he prayed out loud in front of them such that "many repented that they had come against such a venerable old man." Later, on the way to the arena, the police captain urged him to save his life. He asked, "What harm is it to say, 'Lord Caesar,' and to offer sacrifice . . . and to be saved?" Polycarp answered, "I am not going to do what you counsel me."

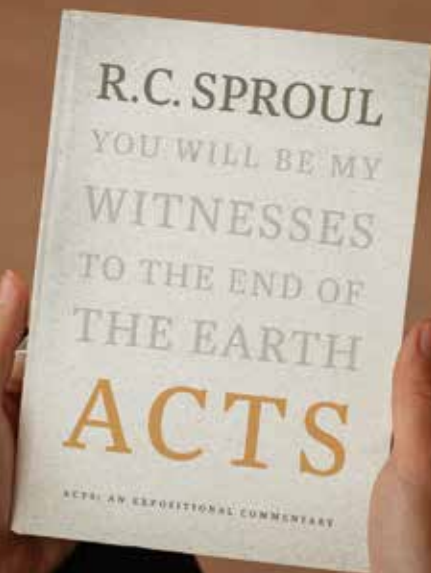
When he came to the arena, there was a loud cheer from the crowds when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. He was brought to the proconsul, who urged Polycarp to repent. "Respect your age"; "Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ." Polycarp refused. He answered, "For eighty and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I

blaspheme my King who saved me?" Again, the proconsul threatened him with being thrown to wild animals or burned in the fire. But Polycarp answered: "You threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come. . . . Come, do what you will." So they brought fire and burned him in the arena. As they lit the pyre, Polycarp prayed aloud and thanked God for the resurrection to everlasting life and for the chance to suffer for Jesus' sake.

In the end, all the persecution of the early church failed to stop the spread of the gospel. Doubtless, it was meant for evil, but in His sovereign providence, God used it for good (see Gen. 50:20). The church father Tertullian famously derided their persecutors, saying, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow: the blood of Christians is seed." That is often repeated in the popular paraphrase "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Ignatius and Polycarp represent what the martyrs of the early church became: focused examples of the general resilience that marked the earliest believers. They were not cowed by the hatred of Rome or the betrayals of neighbors or family members. They faced persecution and death with a boldness of faith that has become uncommon in more comfortable times. Their faithfulness and courage became a catalyst for the spread of the gospel. The willingness of Christians to die rather than deny Jesus powerfully provoked those who saw and heard to learn more about this Savior they trusted so completely. **T**

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JUNE 2026 DAILY BIBLE STUDIES

INTO *the* WORD

ENTRUSTING OURSELVES TO GOD

DR. R.C. SPROUL FREQUENTLY made the point that the real challenge for the Christian is not to “believe in God” but rather to “believe God.” His point was that it is not so difficult to believe that God exists or that He has acted in space and in time. What is much harder for us is to believe the promises of God, to trust His Word and to act on it. Especially in the fire of suffering, we can have a hard time believing that God will bring His good purposes to pass. In such moments, it can be difficult to entrust ourselves to God.

Though it can be hard to do so, entrusting ourselves

to God is exactly what we are called to do in suffering and, indeed, in everything. This month we conclude our study of 1 Peter, studying 4:7–5:14 and the Apostle's concluding words on standing for Jesus as we suffer for Him. Peter's teaching in this section addresses such issues as church leader-

ship, loving service in the body of Christ, spiritual warfare, and more.

The Apostle's instruction is given against the backdrop of suffering, and Peter calls us to humble ourselves before the Lord and to entrust ourselves to Him. As we do that, we will stand firm in the faith, persevering to the end. **1**

“CAN WE FIND A FRIEND SO FAITHFUL, WHO WILL ALL OUR SORROWS SHARE? JESUS KNOWS OUR EV'RY WEAKNESS—TAKE IT TO THE LORD IN PRAYER!”

—Joseph Scriven, from the hymn
“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

ABIDING IN THE WORD

These verses parallel the themes of the studies each week. We encourage you to hide them in your heart so that you may not sin against the Lord:

Week of June 7	ZECHARIAH 13:9
Week of June 14	PROVERBS 29:25
Week of June 21	1 PETER 5:12
Week of June 28	2 PETER 1:3

SELF-CONTROL AND SOBRIETY

1 PETER 4:7 “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Self-control and sober-mindedness serve our prayers (1 Peter 4:7) because it takes a calm mind and a disciplined life to best discern what we must pray for and to pray most effectively according to the teaching of God's Word. The Lord is at hand, so let us live sober, self-controlled lives, praying for the kingdom of God to come and His will to be done.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Joel 2:1–17
Amos 5:18–24
Luke 3:1–18
2 Peter 3:1–13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 7–9
John 13:21–14:14

Eschatology—the doctrine of last or final things—is a topic that has fascinated many believers across the ages. Periodically in the history of the church, interest in the last days has reached a fever pitch, leading people to set dates for the return of Christ, to abandon their earthly duties, or to devote all their theological study to eschatology. Scripture, however, never commends such things when it talks about the last days. Instead, the Bible's teaching on the end of history and the second advent of Jesus is typically given to establish a theological foundation for an exhortation to faithfulness to our present callings (e.g., see Phil. 4:4–9).

We see this in today's verse. Peter has been teaching us that we should be resolved to suffer for Christ and not to fear pain because final judgment is coming. On judgment day, all people will give an account to God for their lives, and only those who have persevered in trusting Christ and died in faith will be resurrected to eternal glory. The rest will be resurrected to everlasting condemnation and punishment (1 Peter 4:1–6; see also Dan. 12:1–2; Rev. 20:11–22:5). That we should not fear suffering is one practical ramification of the fact that eschatological or final judgment is coming, but it is not the only conclusion for Christian living that Peter draws. The sure coming of the end should also make us “self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of [our] prayers” (1 Peter 4:7).

We have significantly erred if our understanding that the return of Christ is at hand leads to wild speculation about the timing of events and the date of Jesus' return and to the abandonment of faithfulness in our present vocations. Awareness that Jesus will soon come to judge the living and the dead should motivate obedience to our duties, for the Lord will not reward those who shun their worldly responsibilities or develop intricate timetables and theories about the end of history and all related persons and events. Christ will reward those who do the will of our Father in heaven, who use their gifts for His kingdom, who care for His people (Matt. 7:21–23; 25:14–46). Of course, we do not merit eternal life through this obedience. Salvation is a gift of God received by faith alone in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8–9). Nevertheless, the Lord made us for good works (v. 10), and these good works consist not in speculative eschatological predictions but in service to God and neighbor fueled by the Holy Spirit and fostered through prayer (1 Peter 4:7). **T**

EARNEST LOVE

1 PETER 4:8 “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

Christ could return at any moment to judge the world. Thus, we should be willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus because we know that those who persevere in trusting Christ will pass through judgment into an eternal reward in glory. Jesus' imminent return should also prompt us to self-control and sober-mindedness, not speculating about when the end will occur but praying for ourselves and for others to remain faithful to God (1 Peter 4:1–7).

In today's verse, the Apostle Peter gives further instruction on how to live faithfully in light of the near return of Jesus. We read, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (v. 8). Note first how Peter stresses love as the most important duty of the Christian—“above all” we must love. Throughout the New Testament, we find the Apostles identifying love as the chief Christian virtue, with 1 Corinthians 13 serving as the most extended treatment of love's importance. In that text, Paul tells us very plainly that without love, we will gain nothing (v. 3).

Peter tells us not only that love is the most important Christian virtue but also that we are to love “earnestly” (1 Peter 4:8). Our love for other believers is to be sincere and strong, coming from the heart and not mere lip service. We are to build up our affection for our fellow Christians through regular participation in the life of the church. By grace, we come to love others more deeply as we engage with them.

One reason for love's importance, we read also in 1 Peter 4:8, is that “love covers a multitude of sins.” The Apostle does not mean that our love atones for sin; rather, the point is that love overlooks sins that can be overlooked, sins of belief that do not strike at the heart of the gospel and sins of behavior that do not tear Christian fellowship apart. The early church father Clement of Rome comments: “Love hides a multitude of sins. Love puts up with everything and is always patient. There is nothing vulgar about love, nothing arrogant. . . . Without love, nothing can please God.” Matthew Henry well observes that love “inclines people to forgive and forget offences against themselves, to cover and conceal the sins of others, rather than aggravate them and spread them abroad. It teaches us to love those who are but weak, and who have been guilty of many evil things before their conversion; and it prepares for mercy at the hand of God, who hath promised to forgive those that forgive others.” **T**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Dr. Sproul writes in his commentary on 1 and 2 Peter that “love does not seek to expose our neighbor for every petty weakness but to cover him or her from the attacks of the world.” Love must expose serious sins to the appropriate parties, but love does not nitpick or make a big deal about every transgression. Love is patient with people, not exaggerating their errors as they mature in Christ. Let us love other Christians earnestly in these ways.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Leviticus 19:17–18
Proverbs 10:12
Matthew 22:34–40
2 John 5–6

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 10–12
John 14:15–31

WILLING HOSPITALITY

1 PETER 4:9 “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

The kind of hospitality that we can show differs depending on factors such as our resources, time, and family situation. Nevertheless, we are all called to be hospitable in some way. This can mean hosting people ourselves, informing church leaders of needs in the congregation, directing people to the hospitality ministry, or bringing a meal or outgrown clothing. Let us be as hospitable as we can when opportunities arise.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 22:9
Acts 21:7
Romans 12:13
Hebrews 13:2

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 13–15
John 15:1–17

Love is the chief Christian virtue and the one that will continue forever (1 Cor. 13). Therefore, we are not surprised that Peter includes it in his list of instructions for Christian living as we anticipate the return of Jesus and the final judgment (1 Peter 4:8). In today's verse, the Apostle gives a specific example of how we are to love others when he writes that we must “show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (v. 9).

Commentators note the importance of hospitality in the early church. Humanly speaking, the spread of the gospel in the first century depended on believers' willingness to receive traveling missionaries and preachers to minister in their towns because lodging was expensive and some innkeepers, Jewish and pagan alike, viewed the early Christians with suspicion. Without Christians' providing room and board to these individuals, the progress of evangelization and discipleship was slow or impossible in some places. Furthermore, the first Christians gathered for worship and teaching in homes (e.g., see Rom. 16:5). This would not happen if believers with larger houses did not allow local congregations to meet there. Hospitality, then, was a matter of survival for the early church.

In the modern West, Christian hospitality is not a matter of life and death in the same way, although the situation in some parts of the world is very much like that of the early church. Nevertheless, Christian hospitality is still a calling for all believers. As we are able, we are to receive others in our homes, assist those in need, and so forth. The hospitality shown in acts such as hosting a Bible study or having others over for a meal after church assists believers in growing in their affection for one another and allows us to disciple one another. Inviting non-Christian friends and family members over for a meal or to a party with other believers can open up doors for sharing the gospel.

Peter says that it is not enough to show hospitality but that we must show it “without grumbling.” To be hospitable to others requires an investment of energy and resources, and we can complain about this even if we are being hospitable. This should not be. John Calvin comments: “It is a rare example that one spends himself and his own on his neighbor without any disparaging reflection. . . . The Apostle would have us to show kindness willingly and with a cheerful mind.”

STEWARDED GOD'S VARIED GRACE

1 PETER 4:10 “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.”

James 1:17 states that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” All that we have that is good in this world ultimately comes from God and belongs to Him. After all, He made the universe and tells us that “the world and its fullness are mine” (Ps. 50:12). This is true whether we are talking about physical goods or spiritual goods, and since they ultimately belong to Him, everything we have is not finally ours. We are stewards called to manage our goods under the authority of God and for His glory.

The Apostle Peter makes this point in today's passage with respect to spiritual gifts. Let us start with the end of 1 Peter 4:10, where we are called to be “good stewards of God's varied grace.” God is full of grace, and He manifests His grace—His undeserved favor—in different ways. There is the common grace by which He sustains all living things (Matt. 5:45). There is also the special grace of salvation that effects our redemption (Eph. 2:8–9). By His special grace, the Lord also gives a variety of spiritual gifts, which are listed in several places in the New Testament, including 1 Peter 4:11.

God gives a variety of gifts to His people, and today's verse indicates that every Christian has at least one gift—“as each has received a gift” (v. 10). So, as John Calvin reminds us in his commentary, when we use the spiritual gifts that God has given us, “we do not give our own, but only dispense what God has committed to us.” We dare not boast in our gifts, for they are not from anything in us but are granted by the Lord.

Our Lord grants us spiritual gifts so that we can use them “to serve one another” (1 Peter 4:10). We must not employ our gifts to advance ourselves. Instead, we are to use our spiritual gifts for the good of others and for the well-being of Christ's church. Practically speaking, this means that we participate in church life not only to receive from the pastor and others but also to give of ourselves for building up the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:12). We remember that we are stewards of God's gifts and must use them as He directs. Augustine of Hippo writes, “God has granted to each of us the special graces needed for the upbuilding of his church, so that we will do what he has indicated should be done, not only without complaint but with joy.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Because God is the giver of gifts, every Christian is responsible to properly steward those gifts. Let us use our gifts responsibly and seek opportunities to serve others in the church with the gifts that God has given to us. If we are not using our gifts to bless others, we are disobeying the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 2:6
Romans 12:3–8
1 Corinthians 12
Ephesians 4:1–16

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 16–18
John 15:18–16:15

1 PETER 4:11a "... whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies."



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

Not all of us are called to public ministry, but all of us will have opportunity to give counsel to others and to serve others in many different ways. When we give counsel, let us use words that are appropriate for the occasion and reflective of biblical truth. When we serve, let us do so relying on God's strength, remembering that He will more than make up for anything that we have to give up when we serve others.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 23:15–16
Philippians 4:13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 19–22
John 16:16–33

THE WEEKEND

2 Chronicles 23–27
John 17

Dr. R.C. Sproul, commenting on 1 Peter 4:10–11, writes that "every talent and ability [we] have is a gift from God, and [we] have a responsibility to exercise it." Our Lord has given every believer at least one spiritual gift to be used for the sake of the church, and if we are not employing our gifts in a local congregation, then we should call the reality of our faith into question (Matt. 25:14–30; James 2:14–26). The point here is not to undermine our assurance of salvation but to be reminded that we are saved by God for service to God and to other people. Christ redeems us not merely as individuals but also as a corporate people, incorporating us into His body, the church. When we do not each use our gifts, the whole body suffers (1 Cor. 12).

Continuing his teaching on spiritual gifts, Peter in today's verse gives guidance for how we are to use our gifts. Unlike other gift inventories in the New Testament, the Apostle's list mentions two categories of gifts under which many other gifts fall: speaking and serving (1 Peter 4:11a). Without identifying every spiritual gift—which is impossible, for spiritual gifts come from the infinite goodness of God—Peter gives a principle to follow for the gifts in each category.

First, when employing speaking gifts, we must speak "as one who speaks oracles of God." The Apostle may be emphasizing gifts of preaching and teaching in public ministry, though not to the exclusion of private and informal words. His guidance applies also to utterances of wisdom and knowledge, words of comfort, and, when necessary, gentle but firm words of rebuke and correction (Prov. 27:6; 1 Cor. 12:8; 2 Cor. 13:11). To speak these words as we speak oracles of God (1 Peter 4:11a) does not mean that everything we say is divine special revelation, for then our words would be equal to Scripture. Instead, Peter means that we should teach, counsel, and correct with holy and gracious seriousness, as befits the speaking of words that reflect and apply the Bible to specific situations. Matthew Henry comments, "What Christians in private, or ministers in public, teach and speak must be the pure word and oracles of God."

Second, we must rely on "the strength that God supplies" in gifts of service. This admonition applies to gifts such as serving, contributing, leadership, and mercy (Rom. 12:6–8). We will quickly burn out or will come to resent those whom we serve if we exercise these gifts in our own power. **■**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL

JUNE 6–7

THE TRADITIONS OF MEN

KYLE BORG

Few words carry more weight in church history than *tradition*. Against the claims of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the Protestant Reformers contended that God's infallible Word is restricted to the Scriptures and does not include sacred tradition. Yet the Reformers were not inventing a new concern; they were recovering one deeply embedded in the Bible. The prophets, the Apostles, and even Jesus Himself warned that tradition could dangerously reshape the gospel, worship, and the Christian life.

The Apostle Paul's testimony is especially helpful in framing the concern. He describes his former life as one marked by astonishing zeal: "so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14). Paul does not commend this zeal; he presents it as a warning. The traditions that he was once eager to maintain are carefully contrasted with the gospel, because they are the traditions of men, whereas the gospel "is not man's gospel" (v. 11). From this framing we can expose three enduring ways that traditions become dangerous.

First, traditions are dangerous when they are added to salvation. When the Galatians turned toward a distorted gospel, adding circumcision and ceremonial observances, Paul recognized in them the pattern of his former life. Tradition had become an add-on to faith: faith *plus* tradition. When faith is treated as insufficient for justification, Christ Himself is insufficient. That is not a minor adjustment to the gospel but another gospel, one emptied of good news.

Second, traditions are dangerous when

they are added to worship. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes by saying, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). He warns that it is possible to worship God in vain—not only by neglect but also by adding to what God has commanded. Worship shaped by human invention and innovation, however reverent it appears, substitutes God's Word with our own traditions. God is not honored by such empty praise.

Third, traditions are dangerous when they are added to godliness. Rules such as "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" may have the appearance of wisdom, but Paul says that they are "according to human precepts and teachings" and promote "self-made religion" (Col. 2:21–23). These traditions burden consciences, divide believers, and redefine the standard that God has given in His revealed moral will.

All these dangers compromise true freedom. Christ did not ransom His people from sin only to place them under new forms of bondage. We were redeemed, as Peter reminds us, "from the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers" with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19). That freedom is to be received, joyfully lived in, and carefully guarded. We do so by submitting every tradition to the Word of God. Scripture alone is God's infallible rule for faith and life, and whatever cannot stand beneath its authority must be set aside. **■**

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THE GOAL OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 PETER 4:11b "... in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

"Do I live my life for the purpose of the glory of God?" This is a question that each of us should regularly ask ourselves. Only what we do for God's glory has lasting significance, and only what we do through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will receive a reward. May we speak and serve always for the glory of God.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Chronicles 7:1–3
Isaiah 45:25
John 17:24
Romans 16:25–27

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 28–30
John 18

God acts purposefully in all that He does. He does not operate haphazardly but acts with intent and according to what He has planned. Scripture reveals this truth to us in many ways. Ephesians 1:11, for example, declares that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will."

Since God has a purpose for all things, He has a reason for giving us spiritual gifts and directing their use. Today's verse gives us that purpose: "that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11b). We are called to speak in a manner befitting the oracles of God and to serve with the strength that God supplies for the ultimate goal of seeing God glorified in and through His Son.

Reformed theology, which is nothing less than the system of doctrine taught in the Bible, states boldly that the chief end that God has for all things is the revelation of His glory. Our Creator seeks to point all creation to Himself, not out of selfish, self-aggrandizing motives or insecurity but because He is by definition the greatest Being in existence. There is none greater than God (Pss. 47:2; 95:3; Heb. 6:13). His glory is a fact that must be revealed, for we are to delight in all truth (Ps. 51:6). Moreover, the revelation of God's glory constitutes mankind's highest good. Sin is so tragic because it exchanges the glory of the immortal God for lesser goods; it trades in our deepest purpose for that which cannot finally satisfy (Rom. 1:23). In salvation, we are being restored to that for which we were made—God's "eternal glory in Christ" (1 Peter 5:10). Because God's glory is the ultimate purpose and good for human beings, the revelation of His glory in all things is the best possible thing for all people.

Using our spiritual gifts according to Peter's instruction manifests the glory of God. Speaking in a manner befitting the oracles of God directs others to His Word, where they learn of His glory in salvation. Serving with the strength that God supplies demonstrates that He is the source of all good things and is to be thanked and praised accordingly (4:11a). This use of spiritual gifts glorifies God because it shows the world in word and deed that we rely wholly on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, glorifying God is impossible apart from coming to Him through the Savior. Matthew Henry comments, "God is not glorified by any thing we do if we do not offer it to him through the mediation and merits of Jesus Christ." 

THE COMING FIERY TRIAL

1 PETER 4:12 "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Strong, persevering, genuine faith is more precious than gold because its end result is eternal blessing, even our salvation (1 Peter 1:3–9). From an eternal perspective, it is better to have a refined faith, tested and strengthened by suffering, than a weak faith that has not been proved through fiery trials. Let us desire a strong faith and pray that the Lord would grant it to us even if it means suffering.

First Peter returns again and again to the theme of suffering, indicating that the first readers of this epistle were undergoing some kind of persecution for their faith in Jesus (1 Peter 1:6–7; 2:18–20; 3:8–4:6). Not all of this persecution constituted a significant threat to these readers' lives, for several passages indicate that some of the first audience of the epistle suffered only verbal insults and reviling (e.g., 3:9, 16; 4:4). That did not mean, however, that the first readers were not facing intense violence or that slander could not mature into real threats to life. Peter's original audience had to be ready in case violent opposition broke out against them. Every Christian since that day must be prepared as well.

In today's verse, Peter returns to the topic of suffering, this time dealing with more than just verbal abuse. He speaks of the "fiery trial" that can come to every believer (1 Peter 4:12). Since fire can bring pain and destruction, the Apostle is referencing intense forms of persecution. Peter counsels that believers should not be surprised when a fiery trial arrives as if this were something strange or unexpected. He writes from experience. Jesus Himself told Peter and the other disciples that some of them would lose their lives for the sake of Him and the gospel, and He even predicted Peter's own martyrdom (John 21:18–19). Part of the Apostolic message is that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22)—not that our suffering merits eternal life but that our lives between our conversion and our arrival in heaven will involve suffering, and sometimes suffering persecution of the worst kind.

Scripture never calls us to seek out persecution, but persecution can be spiritually beneficial. In calling persecution a "fiery trial," Peter likely has in view the imagery of texts such as Proverbs 27:21, where we read about silver and gold being purified by fire. This ties back nicely to 1 Peter 1:6–7, where the Apostle talks about faith's being tested and proved genuine through various trials, employing the same idea of using fire to test and refine gold. God allows suffering and persecution for the good purpose of refining our faith and removing the idols that we may at times trust instead of the Lord. Our Father sends trials not to destroy us but to strengthen our trust in Him. Matthew Henry comments, "Though [trials] be sharp and fiery, yet they are designed only to try, not to ruin them, to try their sincerity, strength, patience, and trust in God." 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Daniel 11:35
Zechariah 13:7–9
Malachi 3:1–4
Titus 2:11–14

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 31–33
John 19:1–16a

SHARING CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

1 PETER 4:13 "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Rejoicing in suffering does not mean being happy about pain, nor that we cannot look for a way out of it. Instead, it means being glad that we have been counted worthy to be Jesus' disciples and being willing to continue in suffering if the only way to escape it is to deny Jesus. It also means encouraging one another in suffering, for as we do that, we will find it easier to rejoice as we go through trials and tribulations for the sake of Jesus.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalms 30
Daniel 3
Luke 6:22–23
Colossians 1:24–29

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 34–36
John 19:16b–42

Persecution, whether it arrives as physical harm or verbal harassment, should never surprise Christians when it comes upon us for our faith in Christ (1 Peter 4:12). After all, Jesus Himself states that people will hate us for His name's sake (Matt. 10:16–22). Not only should we not be surprised when it comes time to suffer for the Lord, but we also are not called to endure suffering stoically. Quite the contrary—today's verse says that we are to "rejoice insofar as [we] share Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13).

What does it mean to share in Christ's sufferings? It cannot mean that we add to the value of the Lord's atonement or merit salvation for other people by our suffering. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, not by works, not even the work of suffering shame for the name of Jesus (Eph. 2:8–9). Furthermore, Christ's death is unique in its purpose and efficacy. It cannot be repeated or made effectual by any suffering that we endure (Heb. 10:1–18).

To share in Christ's suffering has three possible meanings that ultimately are not mutually exclusive. First, to share in Christ's sufferings could refer to our sharing in the pattern of our Savior's life and death. As His disciples, we are called to model our lives after Jesus, and that includes taking up the cross of suffering as we follow Him (Mark 8:34–35). Second, sharing in Christ's sufferings could simply mean going through suffering because of our allegiance to Jesus. Third, sharing in Christ's sufferings could mean sharing in the messianic woes that precede the final day of the Lord. Zechariah 12–14, among other passages, predicts suffering for the people of God before His fully establishing His kingdom on the earth. The elect will experience woes before the day of the Lord, when Jesus consummates His kingdom, so sharing in Christ's sufferings could refer to our experiencing persecution as we await the Messiah's return.

Whether sharing in Christ's sufferings means one or all three of these options, we are to rejoice today so that we may rejoice and be glad when Jesus' glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:13). As noted in our last study, we are not called to look for persecution, but our response to persecution matters. If we rejoice at the opportunity to suffer for Jesus, then we will persevere through it and not look to escape it at any cost. That demonstrates genuine faith, whose end is eternal glory in Christ's kingdom.

BLESSED WHEN INSULTED

1 PETER 4:14 "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

The Apostle Peter wrote his first canonical epistle to equip believers to respond properly to the suffering we will endure for following Christ. As is true in other areas of life, giving the right response to suffering requires that we have the proper frame of mind. Thinking correctly about our circumstances allows us to approach them rationally and not to be swayed by our emotions into improper or sinful responses. Thus, in 1 Peter 4:12–13, the Apostle helps us get ready for suffering by reminding us that it is sure to come, so we should not be surprised, and that rejoicing in suffering for the sake of Jesus will enable us to persevere in faith unto eternal glory.

Continuing his guidance for developing the proper frame of mind about suffering, Peter tells us in today's verse that "if [we] are insulted for the name of Christ, [we] are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon [us]" (v. 14). Peter's statement reminds us that suffering does not always take physical form; sometimes it consists simply in verbal reproaches for following Jesus. More importantly, he indicates that there is blessing in suffering because it means that the Holy Spirit is resting on us.

The Apostle's language alludes to texts such as Isaiah 11:1–2 and 61:1–2 as well as the account of Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father pronounced that He was pleased with His Son (Matt. 3:13–17). The Spirit's presence indicated that Jesus was the object of God's special favor and blessing. Jesus likewise suffered for the sake of the kingdom. Putting all this together, our suffering persecution for Jesus confirms that God's favor rests on us. Like Jesus, we have the Spirit as proof of this favor, and we are blessed by the Lord even if we must suffer in the short term. These sufferings are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed in us (Rom. 8:19).

Matthew Henry comments: "The best men and the best things usually meet with reproaches in the world. Jesus Christ and his followers, the Spirit of God and the gospel, are all evil-spoken of." If the world persecuted Jesus, who was anointed by the Holy Spirit, we should not be surprised that it persecutes His disciples, who also have the Spirit. We should in fact rejoice, not in the pain itself, but because we are the objects of God's gracious favor and will live with Him forever.



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

True persecution of Christians falls only on those who actually have the Holy Spirit, so our suffering for the sake of Jesus contributes to our assurance of salvation. We have to be careful here—suffering because we are personally annoying is not the result of true persecution. But when we do what Jesus says and suffer for it, we have confirmation that we have the Holy Spirit and therefore possess saving faith in Christ.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 42:1
Ezekiel 39:25–29
Luke 3:21–22
Romans 5:1–5

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Ezra 1–2
John 20

1 PETER 4:15–16 “Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Matthew Henry comments: “There is very little comfort in sufferings when we bring them upon ourselves by our own sin and folly. It is not the suffering, but the cause, that makes the martyr.” No blessing comes to us if the real reason that people do not like us is our being rude or aggressive. God does not reward suffering for being obnoxious.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 20:3
2 Thess. 3:6–12

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Ezra 3–5
John 21

THE WEEKEND

Ezra 6–10
Acts 1:1–2:13

Blessing attends suffering for the name of Jesus, for only those on whom the Holy Spirit rests are the subjects of true Christian persecution and so belong to Christ. These individuals should rejoice in suffering, not glorying in the pain in and of itself but because such rejoicing evidences persevering faith, the only type of faith that leads to eternal glory. These instructions from the Apostle Peter assist us in having the right frame of mind in our suffering so that we are not surprised when it comes and are enabled to hold fast to Jesus in the midst of it (1 Peter 4:12–14).

Note that our suffering at the hands of other people must be for the sake of Jesus if we are to receive God’s blessing. This is important to emphasize, for we easily rationalize any undesired response from others as persecution for our faith and excuse our behavior that brings on trouble. But if we suffer because of our own sin or because we have wrongly involved ourselves in the affairs of others, we are not being persecuted for our faith and are not blessed by God for it. Peter reminds us of this truth in today’s passage.

Earlier in this epistle, Peter wrote that there is no credit for enduring a punishment due to us for our sin (2:20). In such cases, suffering does not come from our holding steadfast to our Christian profession. Suffering the consequences of our personal sin even testifies to the justice of God and the order that He established wherein people generally reap what they sow (Prov. 22:8; Gal. 6:7). First Peter 4:15 returns to this truth when it tells us not to “suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.” The first three specifications of sin represent transgressions of the worst kind, misdeeds that most Christians are unlikely to commit (though believers are capable of the worst of sins, and some Christians have sinned heinously). Peter lists these sins for rhetorical punch, to call our attention to the fact that suffering for our sin is not the blessed suffering that he describes. The sin of meddling is one that more Christians are likely to engage in, at least on occasion. Peter subtly warns us against crying “persecution” when others resist us for getting involved in things that are none of our business.

Suffering for our own sins may bring shame, but there is no shame if we are truly suffering because of our faith and not because of our own sins and shortcomings. At such times, we are to glorify God (1 Peter 4:16). **■**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JUNE 13–14

THE LIVING AND ABIDING WORD

JOHN C.A. FERGUSON

Jesus’ ministry to Peter after His resurrection transformed his life. Two lasting changes that He brought about in this disciple teach us the role of God’s written Word in the Christian life today.

The first change relates to Peter’s use of Scripture. Before the resurrection, Peter’s interactions with others are often guided by his instinct and opinion. Christ met with the disciples after His resurrection and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). He called on Peter to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17). These teachings surely served to focus Peter’s mind toward his need for the Scriptures.

Shortly afterward, the influence of God’s written Word in his life is readily seen. His application of the Psalms led to the appointment of an Apostle in place of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15–26). His sermon at Pentecost draws from several Old Testament passages to explain the divine events of that day (2:14–41). His letters 1 and 2 Peter include Scripture quotations, allusions, and applications. These letters written later in life offer evidence of the permanent effect that Christ’s ministry had on his teaching.

A second and related change in Peter’s life concerns his character. The Word became a compass for him in his actions and words. Although he required further correction, rebukes were not as sharp as before, such as when he objected to Christ’s mission to go to the cross (Matt. 16:22–23). When God revealed a vision to him concerning the gospel for the gentiles, Peter resisted at first, but a gentle course correction was in keeping with increased maturity in his Christian faith.

Although Paul had to speak boldly “to his face” (Gal. 2:11), Peter humbly accepted Paul’s correction and turned from his error. He did not hold this confrontation against Paul, describing him later as “our beloved brother” (2 Peter 3:15). God’s Word made him wise and a living example of the proverb, “Reprove a wise man, and he will love you” (Prov. 9:8).

Peter was already a disciple of the Lord Jesus, so these changes were aspects not of his conversion but of his sanctification. The “living and abiding word of God” by which he had been “born again” (1 Peter 1:23) now readily directed his thinking and character.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). He does not lead us to loosen ties to the Scriptures but rather the opposite. His written Word is the guiding and indispensable light for the believer’s life. It is not a stumbling block to the Holy Spirit’s work but is consonant with it, as shown by Peter at Pentecost.

Through the written Word, Christ also brings about a change for the better in character. As each has his own character, there will be differences in how He works that out, but there will also be a similarity to Peter as God’s Word is at work to bring about, as it did for him, “obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love” (1 Peter 1:22). **■**

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WHERE JUDGMENT BEGINS

1 PETER 4:17–18 “It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’ ”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

John Calvin comments: “If God spares not his own children whom he loves and who obey him, how dreadful will be his severity against enemies and such as are rebellious! There is, then, nothing better than to obey the Gospel, so that God may kindly correct us by his paternal hand for our salvation.” We obey the gospel by continuing to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation. He will then use suffering to purify us, not destroy us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 8:5
Proverbs 11:31
Hebrews 12:3–11
1 Peter 5:10

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Nehemiah 1–3
Acts 2:14–41

Biblically speaking, salvation in its broadest sense describes the entire process from regeneration through conversion, justification, sanctification, and glorification. We were saved in our conversion and justification, are being saved in our sanctification, and will be saved in our glorification (Matt. 10:22; 1 Cor. 15:1–2; Eph. 2:8–9). Our final salvation, though guaranteed in our regeneration and justification, does not happen until we are resurrected and Jesus brings the new heavens and earth. Thus, Peter says that we obtain salvation at the revelation of Jesus Christ—His second coming (1 Peter 1:3–9). He speaks of our need to do good works so that God will be glorified on that last day, the day of His visitation (2:11–12). The reality of final judgment motivates us to persevere in faith through suffering, for all people will give an account to God of their lives on judgment day (4:1–6).

Continuing his exhortation to persevere in faith through suffering, the Apostle in today’s passage highlights final judgment and the salvation we receive on the last day. Judgment, he notes, begins at the “household of God” (v. 17). In the Old Testament, the household or house of God is the tabernacle or temple, where the Lord dwelled in a special way with Israel. More specifically, Peter has in mind Malachi 3:1–4, a prophecy of God’s purifying the temple in the last days. Peter has said that the new covenant church fulfills the house of God such that His true house consists of believers, who are living stones in the Lord’s temple (1 Peter 2:4–7). The judgment, then, that begins at the house of God is the last-day judgment that was inaugurated in Christ’s first advent (see John 3:18). Its purpose for believers is purification, not destruction, as we await the return of Jesus. This passage clearly refutes the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory. Believers’ suffering any temporal consequences of sin occurs before death, not afterward in purgatory before we enter heaven.

The judgment that began in the first advent of Christ reaches its consummation at His return. Peter notes that if believers are “scarcely” saved through this judgment, the outcome for nonbelievers will be far worse (1 Peter 4:17–18). The idea is not that Christians escape hell by the skin of their teeth. Peter’s point is that if the fiery trials of this life are part of the believer’s salvation in the broad sense through sanctification, the fire of the last day will be everlasting suffering for the impenitent who never trust in Jesus. **T**

ENTRUSTING OUR SOULS TO THE FAITHFUL CREATOR

1 PETER 4:19 “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

Matthew Henry, commenting on today’s verse, writes that “it is the duty of Christians, in all their distresses, to look more to the keeping of their souls than to the preserving of their bodies. The soul is of greatest value, and yet in most danger. If suffering from without raise uneasiness, vexation, and other sinful and tormenting passions within, the soul is then the greatest sufferer. If the soul be not well kept, persecution will drive people to apostasy.” The truth that Henry’s words describe no doubt was in Peter’s mind as he wrote his first epistle. The Apostle knew from his own experience that merely the potential of suffering can lead us to deny Christ before others. After all, he denied knowing Jesus while our Lord was on trial so as to escape his own arrest (Luke 22:54–62). Later restored by Jesus, Peter wrote to prepare us to suffer well for Christ, reminding us that fiery trials will come on account of our faith, that suffering confirms the reality of our faith, and that suffering is the means by which the Lord purifies us and readies us for heaven (1 Peter 4:12–18; see John 21:15–19).

Keeping these truths in mind fortifies us to keep trusting in Jesus when we are called to suffer for His sake. Because God is sovereign over all, working out all things according to His will (Eph. 1:11), we know that any suffering we experience comes to us only by His permission and that His hand is in it. Ultimately this is comforting to the faithful, but in the moment, as Dr. R.C. Sproul comments, “the hardest time to believe that God is faithful is when His hand is heavy on your back.” Suffering will either finally build us up or break us, depending on how we respond to it. Pain will lead us to press on with endurance, clinging to God’s promises, or it will move us to permanent bitterness toward the Lord.

How do we press on in endurance when suffering? In addition to keeping in mind the truths stated in 1 Peter 4:12–18, we must follow the Apostle’s admonition for those who suffer according to God’s will to entrust ourselves to the faithful Creator while doing good (v. 19). As we suffer for Jesus, we are to keep serving the Lord and trusting Him, believing that He knows what is best for us. He always fulfills His promises at just the right time, and He will finally reward His servants. Dr. Sproul comments, “If God calls us to suffer, we have to commit our souls to Him, not as to a capricious, vengeful, tyrannical deity, but as to a faithful Creator.” **T**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

John Calvin comments on today’s verse: “The condition of the godly in [their trials] is much happier than that of the unbelieving, who enjoy prosperity to their utmost wishes.” Eternally speaking, it is better to go through trials now for the sake of Christ than to escape them in the present because we do not believe in Him. This is because the godly have an eternal reward, and the prosperity that the wicked enjoy today will not last forever.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 9:9–10
Proverbs 29:25
Jeremiah 39:15–18
2 Timothy 4:18

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Nehemiah 4–5
Acts 2:42–3:10

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SHEPHERDS

1 PETER 5:1–3 “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (vv. 2–3).



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Paul tells Timothy that if a man aspires to be an elder, he desires a noble task (1 Tim. 3:1). Yet an aspiring pastor or elder should enter the ministry not for shameful gain but out of a sincere love for Christ and desire to serve His flock. Let us thank God for godly undershepherds who exercise faithful oversight as examples to the flock of what godliness in all of life looks like.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jeremiah 23:9–40
Ezekiel 34:11–31
Luke 22:24–27
Hebrews 13:17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Nehemiah 6–8
Acts 3:11–4:22

Having taught all Christians how to endure suffering faithfully (1 Peter 4:12–19), Peter turns in today’s passage to address church leaders specifically. This makes good sense, for persecution puts a strain on a congregation, and it often falls on church elders first so that persecutors can more quickly silence the Christian community by taking out its most prominent spokesmen. Moreover, church elders under the pressure of suffering are more apt to exercise their authority sinfully than when things are going well.

The Apostle begins his instruction for elders by calling himself “a fellow elder” (5:1). As an Apostle, Peter had more authority than local church leaders, but his greater authority did not set him above the admonitions that he gives to other elders. He needed to be reminded of what it means to be a faithful leader as well. Peter also notes that he was a witness of Christ’s sufferings and a fellow partaker of the glory to come (v. 1). He did not speak about suffering as one who escaped it. He, too, would be rewarded only if he persevered in faith.

After establishing that his instructions to elders also apply to himself, Peter calls elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (v. 2). Shepherding includes the full scope of teaching God’s Word to His people and leading them for the good of their souls. Pastors and elders, Matthew Henry comments, are tasked with “preaching to [the church] the sincere word of God, and ruling them according to such directions and discipline as the Word of God prescribes.”

Engaging in this work is not enough in itself to be a faithful elder, however. One must have right motives, including a willingness to perform the task and a heart that is not in it for shameful gain (v. 2). Pastors and elders should have a desire for the ministry and should not minister only because they feel compelled by outside forces to do so. They must be free of the love of money and content with a sufficient wage if they are paid—and congregations that have the resources are to pay their pastor enough to reasonably care for himself and his family (1 Cor. 9:1–14; 1 Tim. 3:1–3; 5:17).

Finally, elders must not be “domineering” (1 Peter 5:3). They must be the opposite of the shepherds described in Ezekiel 34:1–10 who ruled with “force and harshness.” Henry writes that pastors and elders are not to be “tyrannizing over [believers] by compulsion and coercive force, or imposing unscriptural and human inventions upon them instead of necessary duty.”

THE UNFADING CROWN OF GLORY

1 PETER 5:4 “When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

As we saw in our last study, the pastors and elders of the church have a weighty responsibility. They are to shepherd the “flock of God” with loving care, not domineering over them as unaccountable autocrats but serving as examples of godliness (1 Peter 5:1–3). This is a difficult task, to be sure, but it is not impossible. Church leaders will find help in fulfilling Peter’s admonition when they remember two things.

First, pastors and elders must keep in mind that the Christians over whom they have authority are the “flock of God” (v. 2). Ultimately, the sheep who make up the church belong not to its undershepherds but to God Himself. Underscoring this point, Peter refers in today’s verse to the return of “the chief Shepherd”—that is, Christ Himself (v. 4). This title reminds us that Jesus is the final authority in the church and that pastors and elders shepherd under His authority and in His name. They are not lords but servants who must lead with the good of the sheep in view. As the Chief Shepherd, the Lord is kind and patient toward His people, and His undershepherds must imitate Him in this. Matthew Henry comments that “[Christians] are not [the pastors’ and elders’], to be lorded over at pleasure; but they are God’s people, and should be treated with love, meekness, and tenderness, for the sake of him to whom they belong.”

Second, pastors and elders have the expectation of a reward to encourage them in shepherding the church as Peter has instructed. At the return of Christ, those pastors and elders who shepherd the flock of God lovingly according to His command “will receive the unfading crown of glory” (v. 4). Being called to be an undershepherd, to bear the office of pastor or elder, is no small thing, and fulfilling the office will require much of those who are called if they are to do it well. Yet Jesus does not call men to eldership or the pastorate without promise of recompense. The “unfading crown of glory” that undershepherds are promised likely refers to extra rewards that faithful pastors and elders will receive in addition to eternal life, though those rewards are not specifically defined. Unlike the crowns of leaves awarded to winners of ancient athletic competitions, crowns that wilted and faded over time, this crown given to pastors and elders will last forever, never fading away.



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Elders and pastors would have to shepherd the flock of Christ according to His standard even if He were never to reward them. But God is so gracious that He promises a reward to those pastors and elders who shepherd well. Let the elders and pastors among us shepherd God’s flock according to His standard, and let us encourage them that they will receive a reward if they do so.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 21
Isaiah 28:5
2 Timothy 2:1–7
Revelation 4

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Nehemiah 9–11
Acts 4:23–37



A GOOD MAN

JOEL KIM



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

Pride is at the root of many other sins. When we think that we are better than we are, we are more apt to mistreat people, to exalt ourselves at the expense of others, and to expect to be served rather than to serve. Let us pursue humility, seeking a right view of ourselves so that we might love others in the church well and grow in holiness.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Zephaniah 2:3
Colossians 3:12–17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Nehemiah 12–13
Acts 5:1–16

THE WEEKEND

Esther 1–6
Acts 5:17–6:7

Elders in the church, including those who are given the title of *pastor* or *minister*, are called to exercise oversight of the church willingly and not for shameful gain. They are not to exercise their authority in a heavy-handed way but are to serve as examples to believers (1 Peter 5:1–4). If elders have these responsibilities, church members have corresponding duties, and Peter outlines some of these in today's verse.

The Apostle tells those “who are younger” to “be subject to the elders” (v. 5). Commentators debate whether “younger” refers to the entire congregation except the elders or to young people who are not yet adults or who have just recently reached young adulthood. There are good arguments for the former position, especially since most of the congregation would be younger than those who hold the office of elder even if we wouldn't typically include them in the category of youth. Moreover, all church members are to be subject to the lawful exercise of church authority on the part of the elders. Nevertheless, commentators seem to favor the position that Peter is addressing younger people in the sense of those of a young age. Why call them out in particular? Probably because younger people sometimes put up more resistance to authority than those who are older. Scripture also stresses the need for youth to acquire wisdom (Prov. 1:4). They have physical strength but lack the gray hair that comes as one ages and grows in wisdom (20:29). Youth, therefore, have a special need to subject themselves to church elders so that they can gain wisdom.

Peter then addresses the entire congregation, exhorting all of us to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5). John Calvin comments that Peter “calls those humble, who being emptied of every confidence in their own power, wisdom, and righteousness, seek every good from God alone.” Humble people recognize their weaknesses and do not exalt themselves in ways that divide congregations. They know that every good they have comes from the Lord, and they recognize the goods that God gives others. Humility is the way to spiritual growth, for as James 4:6 states, God gives more and more grace to humble people. Matthew Henry writes that “where God giveth grace to be humble, he will give more grace, more wisdom, faith, holiness, and humility.”

When Luke introduces Barnabas in Acts 11:24, he describes him simply: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” In a world that prizes charisma, intellect, credentials, and influence, this description feels anemic. Yet Luke ties Barnabas' goodness to the Spirit's work in him, not to his résumé or personality. That distinction is important for the church today.

Acts tells us that from a small band of bewildered disciples in the upper room who witnessed Jesus crucified, resurrected, and then ascended into heaven, the gospel spread to the heart of the Roman Empire. Luke repeatedly reminds us that “the Lord added to their number day by day” (Acts 2:47). The church flourished despite opposition—arrests, beatings, scattering, and even martyrdom—because God and His Word were at work through ordinary people.

Barnabas exemplified this truth. When the church needed resources, he sold all his land and gave his wealth to the church. When the church was persecuted, many scattered, but he stayed to help lead the church. When the Jerusalem church heard of gentile conversions in Antioch, they sent Barnabas—a Hellenized Jew from Cyprus, known as the “son of encouragement” (4:36). His assignment was daunting: shepherd a fledgling congregation in a hostile environment. Yet Luke highlights not Barnabas' strategy or gifts but his character. He was “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24). Giftedness is not godliness; busyness is not blessedness. The Spirit's fruit—love, joy, peace, patience—matters more than impressive abilities.

Barnabas' ministry in Antioch reflects this Spirit-shaped character. First, he obeyed when called. Leaving Jerusalem for Antioch meant embracing uncertainty and sacrifice. Later, he would leave Antioch again for missionary work with Paul (13:1–3). Second, he exhorted with faithfulness. In a season of persecution, Barnabas urged believers “to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (11:23). His counsel was not theoretical; it was forged in suffering. Third, he rejoiced in the Lord. When Barnabas “saw the grace of God” among the Christians of Antioch, he was glad (v. 23). He could have fixated on imperfections or cultural tensions, but he celebrated God's work among His people. Joy in God's glory—not our own—is a mark of sincere godliness.

Luke highlights Barnabas and his character because the advance of the gospel depends not on extraordinary people with extraordinary gifts but on an extraordinary Savior. God calls ordinary and simple servants so that our confidence rests not in human strength but on Him. Acts reminds us that what the church needs is not renowned but Spirit-filled faithfulness. May we seek this faithfulness and maturity as we serve our extraordinary God.

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CASTING OUR ANXIETIES ON GOD

1 PETER 5:6–7 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

While there are some cases in which a person's anxiety may best be helped by medication and/or counseling, the anxiety that most of us experience is the result of being slow to cast our cares on the Lord. God can handle our concerns, cares, and worries, and He wants us to recognize that truth. May we never be too proud to cast our cares on the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 18:12
Isaiah 2:12
Matthew 6:25–34
Luke 14:11

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Esther 7–9
Acts 6:8–7:22

God “gives grace to the humble,” 1 Peter 5:5 tells us, and indeed we cannot benefit from God's grace apart from humility. The first act of saving faith displays humility, for we must confess our inability to put ourselves right with God in order to rest in Jesus alone for salvation (Rom. 4; Eph. 2:8–9). We must humble ourselves, in other words, to receive Jesus Christ as Savior, for He is God's grace embodied and is given only to the humble (Titus 2:11–14). Humility must also characterize the Christian life after conversion. Only humble people recognize their ongoing need of forgiveness, confess their sin, and experience pardon (1 John 1:8–9).

Since God gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5), we can receive grace only if we humble ourselves before Him. Peter in today's passage tells us to do exactly that—to humble ourselves “under the mighty hand of God” (v. 6). The phrase “mighty hand” harks back to the exodus from Egypt, when the Lord delivered Israel by His “mighty hand” (Ex. 3:19; Deut. 4:34). Surrendering ourselves to the Lord in humility constitutes no true loss, for we are handing ourselves over to the omnipotent Creator for safeguarding.

Peter then says that God will at the “proper time” exalt those who humble themselves before Him (1 Peter 5:6). Note that Peter does not give a date for this “proper time.” That is because our exaltation awaits the day of final judgment, and no one knows that day or hour (Matt. 25:13). On that day, the Lord will vindicate His people, rewarding their trust and showing all creation that we were right to believe His promises, to walk by faith and not by sight (vv. 31–46).

Humility, the Apostle teaches, requires us to cast all our anxieties on the Lord, who cares for His people (1 Peter 5:7). We may not always realize it, but anxiety actually manifests pride. Anxiety arises because we trust in ourselves to fix our own problems but then realize that we cannot do it because we are frail creatures. Thankfully, God has not called us to fix everything ourselves but simply to trust in Him and obey His Word. He cares for us, and that is some of the best news we can ever hear. Matthew Henry comments: “[God] is willing to release you of your care, and take the care of you upon himself. He will either avert what you fear, or support you under it. He will order all events to you so as shall convince you of his paternal love and tenderness towards you; and all shall be so ordered that no hurt, but good, shall come unto you.”

KEEPING WATCH FOR THE DEVIL

1 PETER 5:8 “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

We have read in our study of 1 Peter many exhortations to endure persecution well, to suffer for the sake of Christ knowing that God will reward His children for their faithfulness (1:3–8; 3:8–17; 4:1–6, 12–19). As Peter draws near to the close of his epistle, he reminds us that one supernatural threat stands behind all the persecutions that Christians endure. We are talking, of course, about Satan.

The Apostle in today's verse refers to Satan as our “adversary the devil,” highlighting the reality that he is the chief enemy of the church (see also Matt. 13:24–30). Peter warns that Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The roaring refers to persecution that—like a lion's roar—seeks to intimidate believers. Those whom he ends up devouring are those who buckle under the pressure of persecution and impenitently keep silent about Jesus or turn away from the Savior.

Knowing that Satan is the reality behind all the threats that Christians face in this world, how are we to respond? Peter counsels us to do two things: Be aware and resist Satan by remaining firm in the faith (vv. 8–9). In today's verse, he writes that we are to “be sober-minded; be watchful” (v. 8). We must think clearly, knowing that persecution is intended to cause us to deny Jesus and lose our souls in order to save—for a time—our bodies. Remembering this truth will help us not to succumb to our fear of the devil's roaring and be devoured. Peter's exhortations to be watchful and sober appear in other New Testament texts that talk about the last days, indicating that the devil's activity is particularly pervasive in the last days (e.g., see 1 Thess. 5:6). Jesus brought the last days in His death, resurrection, ascension, session (sitting) at God's right hand, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14–36). Consequently, Satan will be especially on the prowl until Jesus returns. We must therefore be on the lookout. We must, as Matthew Henry comments, “be vigilant; not secure or careless, but rather suspicious of constant danger from this spiritual enemy, and, under that apprehension, to be watchful and diligent to prevent his designs and save our souls.”

We are no match for Satan in our own strength. Thankfully, Jesus has secured victory for His people over the devil. Augustine of Hippo writes, “Who could avoid encountering the teeth of this lion, if the lion from the tribe of Judah had not conquered?”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

We are more likely to succumb to the threat of persecution by denying the Lord if we are not aware of Satan's schemes. He uses the threats of physical danger, loss of income, and other such things to tempt us to stop thinking about our eternal destiny and instead deny Jesus for the sake of bodily comforts and safety. Let us be aware of his schemes so that we can be prepared to recognize why he sends persecutions and to respond faithfully to them.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Matthew 4:8–10
2 Corinthians 11:14
Ephesians 4:27
Revelation 12:7–17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Esther 10–Job 2
Acts 7:23–34

FIRM FAITH RESISTS THE DEVIL

1 PETER 5:9 “Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

By the Holy Spirit, we can resist the devil as we continue to trust in Jesus. Moreover, the more that we know Christ, the easier it will be to trust Him. Thus, we must be striving to grow in our faith, studying the Word of God, praying, attending corporate worship regularly, and so forth. If we are not growing in our knowledge and love of Jesus, it will be difficult to remain firm in the faith and resist the devil.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Zechariah 6:1–5
Ephesians 6:10–18
2 Timothy 2:24–26
James 4:7

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Job 3–6
Acts 7:35–8:3

Satan, the chief enemy of God and His people, goes about like a roaring lion, looking for those whom He may devour (1 Peter 5:8). His roar is the persecution inflicted on the church, designed to scare us into denying the faith so that we can escape danger to life and limb. Escaping the wrath of those who would persecute us by denying Christ does not bring us lasting safety. Instead, that is a leap into the jaws of Satan, since committing final apostasy means that we will not enjoy everlasting life in the blessed presence of God (2 Peter 2:1).

We dare not underestimate the power of the devil and his ability to deceive even the maturest Christian, for he can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). In ourselves, we cannot thwart his plans. Thankfully, if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are on His side. He is not like Satan, who puts on the face of a lion but is ultimately smaller than a kitten before the “Lion of the tribe of Judah,” our Savior who has conquered and is worthy to open the seals of God’s judgment on the earth (Rev. 5:5). When we rest in Jesus and persevere in trusting Him, Satan’s schemes cannot prevail against us. Dr. R.C. Sproul comments: “We are no match for Satan, but once we are equipped with the whole armor of God, Satan is no match for us. This stalking, roaring, threatening lion will flee with his tail between his legs.”

The solution to the threat of Satan, then, consists in remaining firm in the faith, steadfastly resolved to confess Christ even if doing so brings us great pain in this life. Peter tells us this truth in today’s verse (1 Peter 5:9). The word translated as “resist” conveys the idea not of standing still but of active engagement. Resisting the devil requires active ongoing trust in God’s promises and doing all that we can to strengthen our faith. Attending to the ordinary means of grace—the Word of God read and preached, the sacraments, and prayer—is key here. But we also cannot forget to take part in regular Christian fellowship and service. Only through relationships with other believers can we encourage and build up one another (1 Thess. 5:11).

Peter also wants us to remember that any suffering we experience for Jesus is not unique. Others throughout the world have gone through the same kinds of things and worse (1 Peter 5:9). Remembering their endurance can help us persevere as well. 

RESTORED, CONFIRMED, STRENGTHENED, ESTABLISHED

1 PETER 5:10–11 “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Resisting the devil, remaining firm in the faith by learning and believing God’s promises, keeps us from being devoured by Satan (1 Peter 5:8–9). Our enemy seeks to scare us into abandoning the faith by employing the threat of persecution. But if we are confident that eternal glory awaits all who persevere in faith, we can endure the suffering, which is temporary in the grand scheme of eternity: “This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

Peter began his first epistle with the promise of eternal glory and an exhortation that the suffering his original audience faced was but “a little while” (1 Peter 1:3–9). Now, as he reaches the end of his letter and prepares to give his final greetings, the Apostle returns to the glory ahead for the faithful and the temporary nature of suffering. He reminds us that after we have “suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called [us] to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish [us]” (5:10). Commentators note that there is no reason to sharply distinguish between restoring, confirming, strengthening, and establishing, for all these ideas make the same point. Whatever loss we experience in suffering for the Lord Jesus Christ will not be forever. God will return to us all that we lose for the sake of Jesus and much more besides, as He did with Job (Job 42:10–17). He will glorify us, and we will live with Him forever (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

Although Peter has the final day in mind primarily when he speaks of the work of God to restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish us, our Creator begins this work before we are glorified. Going through suffering has a way of increasing our confidence in the Lord; as we persevere, we find ourselves even more committed to Christ on the other side of a trial. As we experience this, we must keep in mind that our loving God more deeply after a trial is the Lord’s work that He performs as we seek Him. Matthew Henry comments, “The perfecting, establishing, strengthening, and settling, of good people in grace, and their perseverance therein, is so difficult a work, that only the God of all grace can accomplish it; and therefore he is earnestly to be sought unto by continual prayer, and dependence upon his promises.” Moreover, we need not doubt that the Lord can fully establish us. As Peter tells us, He is fully sovereign, having eternal dominion over all (1 Peter 5:11). 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

To those who are suffering right now for their faith in Christ, take heart that the Lord’s promise to restore you is sure. To those who are not currently suffering for the sake of Jesus, remember that suffering will come and prepare yourself for it so that you can pass through it and be strengthened on the other side. God is willing to strengthen His people, and He will surely do so in and through Christ.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nehemiah 6:1–9
Psalm 10:17
2 Corinthians 1:21
2 Thessalonians 3:3

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Job 7–9
Acts 8:4–25

1 PETER 5:12–13 “By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Peter’s extension of greeting from others besides himself to the original audience of 1 Peter demonstrates that from the start, making disciples of the nations was a collective work of all believers. Each of us has a role to play in the work of the church, and we are responsible to find that role and perform it in love for God and for His people.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Acts 12:12
2 Corinthians 1:19

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Job 10–12
Acts 8:26–40

THE WEEKEND

Job 13–17
Acts 9:1–31

Before ending his first epistle, Peter makes sure to include in his concluding thoughts a terse summary of the entire message. We see this in today’s passage, where he writes: “This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it” (1 Peter 5:12). By the word “this,” Peter refers to the message of the letter as a whole, the message of Christ’s suffering for the sins of His people and granting them new life, by the Holy Spirit, through faith in the Savior. Ultimately, as we know from this letter itself as well as other passages in Scripture, this granting of life by God’s grace is the work of God alone. He causes us to be born again through the preaching of the Word, and He gives us saving faith in Jesus as a gift, not as something we work up in ourselves (1:22–25; see Eph. 2:8–9).

God’s sovereignty in salvation, however, does not take away our responsibility. His decree by which He governs whatsoever comes to pass establishes the “liberty” and “contingency” of “second causes,” as Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1 puts it. That is, we, the second cause, are not puppets of God, the First Cause. He does not force us to act against our will, though all those whom He has chosen to save will certainly persevere in faith until the end. He glorifies everyone whom He justifies (Rom. 8:28–30). Nevertheless, we must believe and repent. God is sovereign and human beings are responsible. Peter presents our responsibility in the phrase “stand firm in it [the true grace of God]” (1 Peter 5:12). All of God’s elect will continue believing on Jesus and not finally deny Him. We know that we have been elected for salvation as we continue to believe and repent of our sin, even the sin of not standing as firm as we should.

In today’s passage, Peter also states that he wrote his letter “by Silvanus” (v. 12). Silvanus is another form of the name “Silas,” so this Silvanus is almost certainly the Silas who traveled with Paul on his second missionary journey and helped him evangelize and plant churches in Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, and Corinth (Acts 15:36–18:22). Likely he served as an amanuensis, or secretary, to Peter and provided assistance in writing the letter.

“She who is at Babylon” and “Mark” (1 Peter 5:13) convey greetings by way of the Apostle. Early Christians referred to Rome as “Babylon,” so Peter likely wrote his first canonical epistle in Rome. He extends greetings from the church (“she”) there. Mark is John Mark (Acts 12:25), who wrote the gospel of Mark based on Peter’s preaching. **T**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JUNE 27–28

TRY TO DISCERN

TESSA THOMPSON

As his epistles make clear, Paul cared not only about right thinking but also about right doing. In Ephesians 5:10, he commands the believers to “try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” That three-letter word “try” in the ESV is both a comfort and a conviction to any Christian who is serious about growing in spiritual maturity.

The word is, first, a comfort because it reminds us that not everything in life is black and white. While Scripture does give many straightforward commands, it does not tell us exactly what to do in every specific circumstance. You won’t find a verse telling you whom to marry, how to spend your retirement fund, or whether to let your kids read *Harry Potter*. Yes, this can frustrate us at times. If only God would write “yes” or “no” in the sky once in a while. But we should be comforted to remember that just as we patiently forbear with a one-year-old learning to walk, our heavenly Father knows that sanctification is a “more and more” and “one degree of glory to another” process (Phil. 1:9; 2 Cor. 3:18). There will be times that we miss the mark and fail to discern rightly. When this happens, our Father is ready to pick us back up, forgive us, and continue His miraculous work of transformation in us.

The word “try” is, second, a conviction because it demands action. Paul reiterates in Ephesians 5:15, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.” Our “trying” to discern is no halfhearted, erratic endeavor but rather continual paying attention to how we are living. To the sincere Christian, it should matter whether

his manner of life is “filled with the fruit of righteousness” (Phil. 1:11) and preparing him for eternity. This is a lifelong, holy ambition that cannot take place apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. The command to “try,” however, reminds us that we are not passive in this process.

Consider three ways that we can actively try to please the Lord and walk in wisdom:

Ask for it. James 1:5 could not be clearer. If we lack wisdom, asking God for it is a good place to start, because when we ask in faith, He gives it generously.

Search for it. God’s Word is “able to make you wise for salvation” and profitable for “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). The more we grow in sound understanding of Scripture, the better we’ll get at prayerfully applying its truths to real-life circumstances. We should diligently study the Bible, using trusted resources, and plant ourselves under biblical, expository preaching.

Imitate it. Paul writes in Philippians 3:17, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” Sometimes “trying to discern” means seeking out a godly older believer to ask questions and receive counsel or reading the biography of a saint whose walk with God, though imperfect, proved faithful and fruitful.

May our trying as children of God be used by Him to bring about the fruit of steady transforming. **T**

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LOVE AND PEACE IN CHRIST

1 PETER 5:14 "Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ."



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Jesus said that all people will know that they are His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). Our love for one another as demonstrated in our greetings and in our care for fellow Christians is perhaps the strongest testimony that we can give to the watching world. Let us do all that we can to see that our churches show the love of Christ by loving each other.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Numbers 6:22–27
Psalm 29:11
2 Cor. 13:11–14
Hebrews 13:20–25

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Job 18–20
Acts 9:32–10:8

Letters in the ancient world customarily ended with final greetings from the author and from others whom the author represented, as well as an extension of well-wishes. Most of the New Testament Epistles are written according to the format of other ancient letters, containing many of their elements. They are divinely inspired, but that inspiration involved the use of conventions of the time. The Holy Spirit worked through the human authors and common literary styles to give us the very Word of God.

The Apostle Peter concludes his first New Testament epistle with greetings and well-wishes. Silvanus (Silas), the church in Rome (where Peter was when he wrote his letter), and Mark all sent greetings to the original audience through this epistle (5:12–13). In today's verse, Peter extends well-wishes, though by the authority he has as an Apostle and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these are also divine instructions and a benediction from God Himself.

Peter's final instruction to his readers is to "greet one another with the kiss of love" (v. 14). Elsewhere, this sign of affection is called a "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16), and it was a common expression of friendship and fellowship between believers. This practice of giving a "kiss of love" has been recognized by most commentators as reflective of how affection was commonly shown in ancient cultures. Thus, an actual kiss when believers greet one another today is not necessarily required in every setting, though in many cultures greetings continue to be extended with a kiss of friendship. In cultures where people do not customarily extend a kiss when they greet one another, something like a hug, a hearty handshake, or an affectionate pat on the back would be the way that believers could obey Peter's instruction. Ultimately, having true affection for fellow believers is more important than the form of greeting with which it manifests itself. Matthew Henry comments, "All the churches of Jesus Christ ought to have a most affectionate concern one for another; they should love and pray for one another, and be as helpful one to another as they possibly can."

First Peter 5:14 concludes the letter with Peter's Apostolic blessing: "Peace to all of you who are in Christ." Given the suffering that the original audience had endured, they desperately needed peace. This "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), is a gift of the Holy Spirit to settle uneasy hearts and minds. 

HOPE IN THE GRACE TO COME

1 PETER 1:13 "Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

We have finished our study of 1 Peter, an epistle that summarizes much of the theology of the Bible. Those who are well grounded in 1 Peter are prepared to address such topics as the atonement, spiritual gifts, sanctification, Christian ethics, regeneration, church leadership, and more.

Peter teaches on these topics as he explains how Christians are to suffer for the sake of Christ. Believers have been redeemed through the work of the Holy Trinity (1 Peter 1:1–2). This salvation comes at the sovereign initiative of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and we receive it only by faith so that we dearly love Jesus even though our physical eyes have not seen Him. Our salvation is sure, but it will not be consummated until Jesus returns. In the meantime, we will have to choose to endure suffering instead of denying Christ (vv. 3–12).

Suffering well entails setting our hope on the return of Jesus and living holy lives, which is possible only because we have been born again by the Word of God (vv. 13–25). Indeed, we have been set apart by God and are being built into a holy temple for the Lord (2:1–12). Holiness has ramifications for all our relationships. We are to submit to those in authority, and when that leads to suffering, we are to suffer like Christ. Our suffering does not save others, but we can continue entrusting ourselves to God just as He did (vv. 13–25).

Entrusting ourselves to God takes shape in the home, as spouses live according to their respective God-given roles, and in the church, as we love other believers in humility (3:1–8). It also takes shape in the world as we do not repay evil with evil and are prepared to give an answer for our gospel hope when others ask (vv. 9–17). This obedience to God does not save us, but all those who persevere in faith, repentance, and obedience will be exalted in Christ (3:18–4:6).

Suffering well means also that we are not surprised when persecution comes but rather know that suffering for the sake of Jesus while continuing to serve others in the church demonstrates that we are His (4:7–19). Elders serve the church as they minister eagerly and with kindness, and all of us are to humble ourselves before God and resist the devil so that we will be exalted at the proper time (5:1–9).

We will persevere in faith through suffering only if we set our hope on Christ's return, knowing that He will establish us in His blessed presence forever. Let us fix our hope on Jesus' second advent and stand firm in the faith (5:10–14). 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

We get easily distracted by the cares of this world, our possessions, and other things. It takes resolve to keep our hope continually on Christ and His return, and the result of doing so will be that we suffer well and persevere in the faith until the very end. Jesus is indeed coming again, and it could happen at any time. Let us not lose sight of that fact, and may we look forward to it with eagerness.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Job 19:25–27
1 Peter 1:3–9;
4:12–13; 5:10–12
Revelation 22:20

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Job 21–23
Acts 10:9–48



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Remembering His Benefits

RONNI KURTZ

AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT verbs to put into practice in the Christian life is *remembering*. The call for us to “remember” shows up throughout the entirety of the Scriptures. As early as Exodus, we are commanded to “remember this day in which you came out from Egypt” (Ex. 13:3). We are told to remember the word of Moses (Josh. 1:13; Mal. 4:4). Repeated is the command to “remember the wondrous works” of the Lord (1 Chron. 16:12). In the new covenant, we are told to remember Jesus’ words (Luke 24:6–8; John 15:20; Acts 20:35). When we partake of the new covenant sacrament of communion, we are told to do it in remembrance of Jesus (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24).

These are but a few of the many times that we are called to “remember” from Genesis to Revelation. The repetition of the command is instructive. This repetition tells us that we are a forgetful people who need to discipline our minds to stay on God, His works, and His ways. Our minds do not naturally drift toward a faithful recalling of God’s glory and grace but need purposeful training. We must *devote* ourselves to bringing to mind the good, the true, and the beautiful with each passing day.

Numbered among Scripture’s frequent calls for God’s people to remember is Psalm 103. In this psalm of David, we read, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and *forget not all his benefits*” (v. 2, emphasis added). The rest of the psalm walks through many of these “benefits,” those blessings that the Lord has given in Himself and through His work. While these categories do not perfectly capture *all* the benefits listed in this psalm, the blessings that we are called to remember could be summarized by the call to (1) remember God’s salvation (vv. 3–5), (2) remember God’s fatherly care (vv. 6–14), and (3) remember God’s sovereignty (vv. 15–19). The psalm ends with a final call to “Bless the LORD” directed at His angels, His hosts, His works, and oneself.

REMEMBER HIS SALVATION

David first takes our minds toward the fact that in the Lord there is redemption undeserved. This is the Lord who forgives iniquity, heals diseases, and redeems our life from the pit. The Lord is the One who saw our helpless estate and moved us from ruin to riches—who “redeems your life from the pit” and instead “crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (v. 4). It is no wonder, then, that David climaxes

this poetic section with the concluding remark that it is the Lord who satisfies us with that which is good.

REMEMBER HIS FATHERLY CARE

David draws our attention from the way that the Father has redeemed us as His people to the way that He continually cares for us as a loving father would care for his children. Verse 13 serves as a summary of this section: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” God, our Father, knows “our frame,” and He Himself “remembers that we are dust” (v. 14). It is God’s familiarity with our fickleness and frailty that makes it grace upon grace that He “works righteousness” in our direction (v. 6).

REMEMBER HIS SOVEREIGNTY

The reason that God can bring us out from the pit of our misery that we have made of our lives and the reason that He can have the grace not to deal with us according to our iniquities is that “the LORD has established his throne in the heavens” and that “his kingdom rules over all” (v. 19). While the days of man are like grass (v. 15), the Lord and His love are “from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 17).

As readers considering Psalm 103 on *this* side of the cross, we should recognize that all three of these benefits reach their climax in the person and work of Christ. If David points our attention to the benefits of God’s salvation, His fatherly care and His sovereignty reflect how these benefits culminate in Christ.

As for salvation, in verse 10, David tells us that God “does not deal with us accord-

ing to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” What David knew in part, we now know in whole: the imputed righteousness of Christ and His life in place of ours that show in full that God truly deals with us not according to our sins but according to His Son’s righteousness.

As for God’s fatherly care: In verse 13 David calls us God’s children—a title that reaches its fullest beauty as we, Paul

says, receive the Spirit of adoption in the Son (Rom. 8:15–17; Gal. 4:4–7). As the Spirit unites us to the Son, the script of the Son—“Abba! Father!”—now belongs on our lips, for in the union with our Elder Brother Jesus, we now have bold access to the Father through adoption as His children.

As for His sovereignty, in Psalm 103:19, David proclaims that God’s “kingdom rules over all.” John tells us that the kingdom of the Lord “shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Not only is Christ sovereign over every nation and inferior kingdom, but He has also put even death, sin, and hell itself under His feet in defeating each.

The result of remembering the Lord and all His benefits is the heart of Psalm 103:20–22—a heart that is eager to say, “Bless the LORD.” In recalling the infinite riches we get in Christ, we will join the chorus of all creation—visible and invisible alike—saying, “Bless the LORD, O my soul!” (v. 22). This song springs most fervently within our soul when we realize that the greatest benefit we get in the Lord is the Lord Himself. ■

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FOR THE CHURCH

Children's Ministry and the Kingdom

SCOTTY ANDERSON

CHILDREN AREN'T NATURAL PRODUCERS—or at least they don't start out being productive. Human children are notoriously delayed in their development. If young parents had time to stop and think about it (which they generally don't), they might realize that they haven't made a great investment toward their material prosperity. Children need years before they contribute to the functions of a household. Churches sometimes do the same cynical math: Children don't tithe or evangelize or teach or recruit. They do, however, require a lot of space and attention. That kind of thinking leads some churches to look at children as a necessary evil. Children's ministry is merely a tool to get parents in the pew, because families just won't come without programs.

Praise God that His kingdom is led by neither John Stuart Mill nor John Dewey. That is, we're neither utilitarian nor pragmatic. Our King instructs us very clearly how to view children. Jesus tells His disciples, "Let the little children come to me" (Matt. 19:13–14; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). The Bible consistently presents a multi-generational, future-focused view of the body of believers. The Old Testament covenant foundation graciously includes children

as children: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and *your offspring after you* throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you *and to your offspring* after you" (Gen. 17:7, emphasis added throughout). This inclusion remains in the New Testament: "For the promise is for you *and for your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39).

But we don't only say that children belong in the community of the redeemed. The Holy Spirit further obligates us to labor for their faith. Before God's judgment on Sodom, we read that Abraham was chosen so "that he may *command his children* and his household after him to *keep the way of the Lord*" (Gen. 18:19). God echoes the call through Moses in Deuteronomy 6:1–2 to keep the law so as to "fear the LORD your God, *you and your son and your son's son.*" Verses 6–7 add: "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. *You shall teach them diligently to your children.*" We also repeatedly find children present and obligated to be present in worship (Deut. 6:7; 2 Chron. 20:13; Ezra 10:1; Neh. 12:43; Joel 2:15–16). The New Testament confirms the place of children in various ministry situations (Matt. 21:15; Acts 21:3–6), and perhaps

more importantly, New Testament Epistles address children directly. Paul echoes those Old Testament patterns in Ephesians 6:1–3 and Colossians 3:20, and John likewise distinguishes "children" from "young men" and "fathers" in 1 John 2:12–14. A biblical ministry ministers to children.

We should add that ministry to children isn't merely ministering to small adults. The Bible has as many as two dozen different words for *children* and *youth* between the Old and New Testaments. Those various terms speak to different ages and stages of development, relations to adults, and capacities for learning. The Bible's

nuances suggest that we ought to be equally deliberate. Infants were brought to Jesus to be blessed by Him (Luke 18:15). As a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus sat with the rabbis (2:41–48). Young Eutychus stayed up (too late) listening to the Apostle Paul (Acts 20:7–11). The church fulfills this obligation by welcoming children into the assembly. In that sacred gathering, they both observe their parents' worship and themselves worship and hear the preached Word. They are catechized (instructed) in the doctrines of our holy religion by parents and by the larger body in accordance with their capacities. They also enjoy the benefits of the ordinary fellowship expected by the multitude of "one another" commands in the New Testament.

Children's and youth ministry is no modern invention. Reformed churches have pursued it since their beginning. Examples abound through the centuries of the church's proactive efforts to labor for the faith of the congregation's children. Consider John Calvin's Genevan Catechism (1541) or the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Richard Baxter's or Wilhelmus à Brakel's

emphasis on the ministerial duty to catechize and encourage the catechizing of children (seventeenth century), John Quick's *Young Man's Claim* (a 1691 catechism related to the Lord's Supper) or John Willison's *Young Communicant's Catechism* (early eighteenth century), Jonathan Edwards' 1743 meetings with communicants, or Joseph Engles' *Catechism for Young Children* (1840). These and many others testify

to an intentionality of our forefathers to pursue the faith of the congregation's children. In so doing, they affirm an optimism toward early conversion, a wisdom in later admission to communion, and an expect-

tation for progressive spiritual maturation of the young in the local church.

Engaging in such efforts fully aligns with the biblical doctrine of the covenant. No extraordinary methods are needed to foster faith in young church members beyond Word, worship, prayer, and fellowship. Resources abound for Sunday school, catechesis, VBS, summer camps, and similar activities in appropriate venues. But as with all other pursuits of the congregation's edification, workers are needed. Preaching requires pastors, corporate praise requires musicians, and children's ministry requires those equipped to labor for children's faith and obedience to Christ (because we don't want them to remain as children; Eph. 4:11–16). We labor here as an essential good, not a necessary evil. The burden is God-given. He says in essence, "These are my children" (Ezek. 16:20–21), set apart to Him (1 Cor. 7:14). They are a stewardship entrusted to us for which we will give an account. **TC**

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CITY ON A HILL

Acting Honorably in All Things

GRANT R. CASTLEBERRY

ONE OF THE LESS TALKED-ABOUT themes of the Christian life is that the believer is often called to be shamed by the world for the honor of God. Paul famously said at the end of Galatians, “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). In other words, what the world honored, he had crucified, and what the world shamed, Paul had embraced—namely, the cross of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah endured a similar experience in Jerusalem before it was taken by the Babylonians in 586 BC. In the midst of a Jerusalem that had turned its back against the Lord, Jeremiah proclaimed, “The word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (Jer. 20:8). Since the people despised God, they also despised His Word, and thus they despised Jeremiah, the preacher of the Word. He had become a reproach to Israel. He was shamed—literally beaten by the priest and thrown into the stocks (v. 2). In a sense, Jeremiah had crucified the world to himself, and the world shamed Jeremiah in return.

SHAMED YET HONORED

The same story is repeated again and again throughout Scripture. The believer lives for the honor of God but to the derision

of the world. The cross-shaped life is the Christian life. To be shamed by the world is to demonstrate the Lord’s honor. Living this way, we show that He is most valuable. We are all called to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). It is the story of every saint. It is Peter, Paul, James, John, and you and me. It is the Christian life. Paul even calls it “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). Obviously, nothing is lacking in Christ’s afflictions in the sense of their worth. What is lacking is a fresh view of the cross-shaped life to a watching world; it is this that believers demonstrate through their afflictions.

It is no wonder, then, that the writer to the Hebrews, in his final exhortations, commands his hearers to follow in the footsteps of Christ:

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. (Heb. 13:12–14)

Who gives the reproach to the Christian? The world does. The same world that cruci-

fied Christ. Why does the Christian endure this shame? The writer of Hebrews answers, “Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” Of course, by “the city that is to come,” he is referring to the new heavens and new earth described in Revelation 21–22. It is the cross-shaped life that leads to eternity. It is reproach from the world that demonstrates God’s honor. It is a cross-shaped life lived as a “sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb. 13:15).

A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

In this light, we can understand one of the final statements of the writer to the Hebrews: “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18). This one verse contains remarkable insights into the Christian life.

First, the writer states that he has a “clear conscience.” What a wonderful treasure to possess. The conscience is the internal mechanism of the soul that is calibrated to the law of God. Often, in the unbeliever, the conscience is distorted or even broken as he commits intentional sins over time. But for the believer, the conscience has been and is continually restored and purified (Ps. 51:10). Earlier, the writer of Hebrews had said that the “blood of Christ” is used to “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14). The Holy Spirit then uses a recalibrated conscience to convict the Christian of sin and point him to the gospel. When the believer with a recalibrated conscience is not in a state of conviction, it can be said of him that his conscience is clear. The clear conscience gives the believer great boldness and confidence. Remember, we are experiencing

opposition from the world, so we need bold and confident hearts to face the opposition. In a word, we need clear consciences.

ACTING HONORABLY IN ALL THINGS

Second, the conscience is guided by an overwhelming desire: “to act honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18). The Greek word translated as “honorably” (*kalōs*) could also be translated “fittingly” or “appropriately.”

“Fittingly” according to whose standard? we might ask. The obvious answer: Jesus Christ’s standard. We act fittingly according to all that Christ commanded us to obey (Matt. 28:20). We live for Him. Not for the world. This definition of acting honorably must be emphasized in our minds repetitively like the ticking of a met-

ronome, because the world is holding forth a different definition of living honorably. Phrases such as “choose love” imply that you are unloving if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle or beliefs. Tolerance has been falsely equated with love. What a massive deception that Satan has accomplished. Jesus said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is the only Way. The only Truth. The only Life. It is unloving to pretend that He is not. It is dishonorable to fail to give Jesus the honor that is due to Him (Phil. 2:9–11). To live honorably means lifting up Jesus in all that we do even though we will be shamed by the world. So be it. The world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

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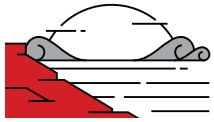
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The Holy Spirit's Ministry Across the Covenants

ROBERT LETHAM

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS one of the members of the Trinity, in eternal and indivisible union with the Father and the Son. As such, in all of God's external acts He works inseparably together with the Father and the Son. He is active throughout the history of the universe, without intermission, in all the ways that He operates. There should be no surprise that this is the case throughout the history of redemption, in the Old Testament as well as the New. At the same time, there are distinct developments that take place in relation to His church and to us after the decisive events of the death, resurrection, and ascension of the incarnate Son.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Creation. It is clear from the Old Testament that creation was the work of the indivisible Trinity, even though its fuller revelation awaited the coming of Christ. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God is brooding over the waters, which are then pushed back to accommodate life on earth. The implication is that the Spirit gives life to all creatures. Thus, the Spirit was fully engaged in the creation of humanity. The plural in Genesis 1:26–27—"Let us make man in our image"—entails the inseparable involve-

ment of all three persons. In the Psalms, the Spirit is described as the Creator ("by the breath of his mouth"; Ps. 33:6–9), the giver of life, and the preserver and governor of the universe (Ps. 104:27–30). No wonder that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381) describes the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of Life."

Furthermore, the Spirit pervades the created order, maintaining it and granting life to all His creatures (Job 26:13; 27:3; 32:8; 33:4; 34:14–15; Ps. 104:27–30; Isa. 40:7; 42:5; 59:19). He gives life to dead bones (Ezek. 37:5–14). He is omnipresent, inescapable (Ps. 139:7), identified with God rather than created beings (Isa. 40:12–14), the breath of the Almighty that gives humans understanding (Job 32:8) and that sustains or in turn withers contingent entities (Isa. 40:7). The Spirit's pervasion and direction of the world is continuous, without intermission, operative as much before as after the advent of Christ. It is not constrained or limited by what happens in redemption.

In and with God's people. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is sometimes equated with the breath of God, indicating action that effects dramatic change. The Spirit rushes upon Saul, on His messengers, and

on David, while also departing from Saul (1 Sam. 10:5–12; 16:13–14; 19:18–24) and producing sudden, overwhelming transitory impulses not necessarily related to a person's condition (Judg. 13:25; 14:19).

The Spirit appoints and endows the capacity for office, such as in the cases of the

20; Ezek. 3:12–24; 8:3; 11:1, 5; 37:1). He is the source of prophecy. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed states that the Holy Spirit "spoke by the prophets." Very occasionally, this happened in ecstatic ways, but as an exception rather than a rule. The writing prophets were hardly

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seventy elders, of Joshua in succeeding Moses, and of David's anointing as king (Num. 11:16–25; Deut. 34:9; 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13).

The Spirit is shared among the leaders of Israel. The Lord took the Spirit that was on Moses and placed Him on the seventy elders (Num. 11:25). Moses laid hands on Joshua, with the result that he was filled with the Spirit of wisdom (Deut. 34:9). Elisha received a double portion of the Spirit from Elijah (2 Kings 2:5–14). The Spirit is not a possession of any one individual.

The Spirit gives knowledge and insight (Gen. 41:38; Num. 11:16–17, 25; 27:18–

in a trancelike state; their faculties were fully engaged in research, as they examined the historical records and then crafted their writing. That the capacity to prophecy in these particular ways came from the Spirit and not from inherent human abilities is clear. From this, Paul and others conclude that the Spirit of God breathed out the Scriptures of the Old Testament in all the ways that they were produced (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 Peter 1:10–12; 2 Peter 1:20–21) while using the actions of the human authors. Furthermore, the Spirit's voice is living and dynamic, for He still



speaks (present tense) through the text that He inspired (Heb. 3:7).

That the Spirit's coming upon a person cannot be identified with ecstatic experiences is evident in the case of Bezalel, the craftsman who produced the tabernacle furniture. He had been filled by the Spirit for this purpose, as had other "able men" (Ex. 31:1–6). Throughout their lives, the Spirit had guided and equipped these men to develop the skills and craftsmanship required, superintending their work over a lifetime of patient learning and development.

Above all, an outpouring of the Spirit was to accompany the future realization of the kingdom of God in the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 42:1; 61:1–3; Joel 2:28–32; Zech. 4:6), an effusion that was to be in abundant measure (Isa. 11:1–10; 32:15–18), resting on the Anointed One for His work, and in turn poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28–32).

In individuals. In the Old Testament, the Spirit is God's presence, and therefore He was with and in His people. It might appear that, according to Psalm 51:11, the Spirit was with the faithful on merely an intermittent basis. This is not the case, however. David, in confessing his sin, realizes that continued impenitence is incompatible with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, confessing Yahweh as the one true God, given the range of pressures from Near Eastern paganism, was as dependent on the Spirit as is confessing Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

In the Old Testament, we find "the indwelling Spirit of holiness in the hearts of God's children," as B.B. Warfield says. Warfield points to "the revolutionary ethical consequences" that follow, with conviction of sin, changes in lives, and protection from the nation's enemies (1 Sam. 10:6; Pss. 51:11; 143:10–11; Isa. 63:10–14). Warfield concludes, correctly, that the Spirit was op-

erative in all the areas that He is said to be at work in the New Testament.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

After Pentecost, there is a dramatic increase in reference to the Spirit at work. Clearly, He is presented as functioning in larger and more evident ways. All these particular works are redemptive. Since the history of redemption reaches its climax in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, this is hardly surprising. Pentecost is an integral part of that. Here the prophecies of, among others, Jeremiah 31:31–33 and Joel 2:28–32 reach their fulfillment.

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18–23), and thereafter the Spirit pervades the birth and infancy narratives in Luke (2:25–27; 3:16, 21–22; 4:1, 14, 16–19). At the outset of Jesus' ministry, He is anointed by the Spirit (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22). At the cross, He offers Himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14), and it is by the Spirit that the Father raises Him from the dead, as He will raise us in the future (Rom. 8:10–11). His ascension is inextricably connected with the coming of the Spirit a few days later (Acts 1:8–11).

Thereafter, the Spirit is at work in the church. He sends the Apostles on their journey and directs them on the details of their work (Acts 13:2–4; 16:6–10). He fills and equips leaders for their task (Acts 6:1–6; 2 Tim. 1:7). He continues to superintend the writing of Scripture (2 Peter 1:20–21). He gives gifts to His church.

He personally indwells the faithful, making His permanent residence with us and in us (John 14:16–23; Eph. 3:16–17), and He intercedes for us as we try to pray (Rom. 8:26–27). He enables us to grow in grace and to conquer sin. He grants life (vv. 1–14). He assures us of our adoption (vv. 15–16;

Gal. 4:4–6). It is by His power and grace that we worship the Father through the Son (Eph. 2:18). He assures us of our salvation (Rom. 8:15–17; 1 John 3:24) and is the guarantor of our future inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14). He is transforming us into the image of the glorified Christ, from one

at Pentecost, there is a clear continuity with the state of the covenant community of the Old Testament. Yet that should not be thought to diminish the impact of the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost. What was present before, perhaps in the background, is now powerfully prom-

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degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). His words strengthen us as we face death (Rev. 14:13). He will raise us from the dead, in union with Christ the Son, just as He did with Christ Himself (Rom. 8:10–11). Our resurrection bodies and the mode of life that we will have will be in and under the pervasive power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:35–49).

He is still providentially moving in the world and the universe, governing it inseparably with the Father and the Son in the unity of the indivisible Trinity. Nothing here changes, not through inertia but because God Himself is eternally true to who He is.

For all the developments that occurred

incent in center stage. We have been said to be living in the age of the Spirit, and therefore, we are directed, with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, to "look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come," where unimaginably greater things await us (1 Cor. 2:9). **T**

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