

## Finding HOPE in Hard Times



Has anyone ever hurt you without a just cause? Have you ever felt disconnected from family and friends? Has your world ever come apart at the seams, leaving you feeling powerless, broken, and utterly alone?

Suffering sucks. Almost two thousand years ago, a letter of encouragement was written to people going through precisely this experience. They were followers of Jesus who lived in the area of present-day Turkey. Historians figure they were people who lived on the margins of society, persecuted by the established religious community of the Jews and oppressed by the political force of the Roman Empire. They too felt squeezed on all sides without hope of escape. It is to these folks back then – and to YOU today – that the letter of First Peter was written.

Its five chapters are found toward the end of the New Testament and were written by the Apostle Peter to give encouragement and hope to his hurting brothers and sisters. Peter's words stretch our thinking to consider a fresh way of looking at our life circumstances, no matter how hopeless they may appear. His letter is a personal wake up call to discover God working in and through our life in some shocking, surprising ways!

His letter begins by thanking God for “causing us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). This is the game-changer. Our life is not simply the product of lousy circumstances but also the result of a loving God who relentlessly brings us resurrection power when we feel only the cold, dark tomb of death. There is a bigger picture to our suffering!

Strange as it may seem, suffering can be a portal into a deeper experience of God's love and joy and peace. It can be a way to more intimately connect with Jesus (4:12-13; see also Phil. 3:10) and with others (1:22) through love. Suffering can be the sharp plow to break up the hard, crusty ground of our lives that has been barren for far too long! It offers the opportunity for new growth and new directions. It can open us for us new dimensions of healing and wholeness (2:24).

The problem is that when we encounter suffering, it often becomes our all-consuming focus. Like the pull of a black hole, we are sucked into its darkness, unable to see any light at the end of the tunnel. But Peter says we have a choice. We can choose to focus in on the bigger picture (1:13, 2:2, 3:15, etc.). We can learn to trust God who is always working for our good. The Holy Spirit faithfully brings about life-change which enables us to live *more* abundantly, *more* lovingly, *more* confidently. It's truly the FIRE of God's victorious love within the flames of persecution and suffering!

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Peter does give us some practical things we can do which will help us to more fully experience the presence of God's power in fiery times:

- ✓ **Dwell upon the REAL YOU that God has called to greatness (2: 1-10).** You are royalty, kings and queens, in God's sight. You are the carriers of the infinite! You are Children of the Light, called to shine brightly. Read and ponder and dwell upon Bible passages and stories (and other literature as well) that remind you of your true self and calling.
- ✓ **Use occasions to risk and reach out to others in small but powerful ways (4: 8-11).** When you are able to stretch beyond your normal boundaries, something magical happens. It is the power of trust (in God) that breaks down our prison walls. Our self-absorption is shattered. God's love begins to flow through us. Practice risky acts of kindness in your marriage, your friendships, your workplace, and even in your church community (especially with those with whom you feel some irritation or persecution).
- ✓ **Instead of looking outside yourself to blame others, look *within* to embrace the work of the Spirit inside your heart (5: 6-10).** Remember, humility is taken from humus = earth. Humility is honestly looking at our attitudes and actions, a way of being “grounded” in what is real. We trust the Spirit of Truth to give us clear vision. God is our Companion who will never forsake us. He is our Shepherd who will guide us to greener pastures. He deeply cares for you and works unceasingly to bring health and wholeness into your life.

Real living is all about being changed. It is about a journey from one landscape to another, discovering jaw-dropping beauty just around the next bend in the road. It is about surrendering all of our protective, self-centered ways to manipulate life into the strong, loving, nail-scarred hands of a Carpenter who loves the dickens out of you!

It feels absolutely crazy to practice the things that Peter recommends in his letter. But, if you do, you will find a sanity that will warm and surround you with the very arms of God himself.

Let us know how we can help:



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