

**Peter: Scholar and Teacher
in the School of Suffering**
Studies in the First Epistle of Peter

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of four talks given by David Gooding in Armagh (N. Ireland) in May 1964. (The order of talks 3 and 4 is reversed in this transcript.)

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: pet.002/bh

Suffering in Relation to our Faith

Readings: Mark 8:27–33; 1 Peter 2:4–8; Luke 22:31–32; 1 Peter 1:3–10, 17–21¹

In the First Epistle of Peter the subject of *suffering* is very large. It is mentioned in all the chapters as one of Peter's main topics. It becomes apparent that, even before he wrote this letter, the Christians to whom he wrote were 'in heaviness through manifold temptations' (1:6 KJV).

And worse was yet to come. Peter had been in Rome along with other Christian workers and he had been watching the way the wind of politics was blowing. There were times in that city that spelt coming trouble and persecution for the Christian community at large. With a shepherd heart Peter writes his letter to Christians in these faraway provinces and warns them kindly as he breaks the news to them, 'A fiery trial is about to come and test you. Don't be surprised when it comes, don't count it a strange thing' (4:12). There had been suffering and more suffering was to come, so it is natural that in his epistles Peter should discuss this topic at length.

Suffering for Christ

When we look closer, we see that the suffering involved was largely for the sake of Christ and for Christian testimony, a subject on which perhaps we in this favoured country know comparatively little. We do have our sufferings through illness, through disappointment, and some sufferings that we are the cause of ourselves; but perhaps we know very little of real suffering and sacrifice for the sake of Christ.

However, many of our brothers and sisters, hundreds of them at this moment, find this a real thing. For the sake of their testimony they are behind bars and being brainwashed and tortured. But nevertheless we shall doubtless find common ground with them somewhere. Even though it is only a little, all of us sooner or later will find that it costs something to be a Christian. 'Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12).

And then that phrase, 'you have been grieved by various trials' (1 Pet 1:6), may well take in suffering that comes from other causes as well as from suffering for the testimony of Christ. So we shall read this letter with a sympathetic heart, to find comfort if already we have suffered, and to buttress our faith against the day in which we may be called upon to suffer for the Lord. Tonight I want to talk about suffering in relation to our faith; tomorrow,

¹ Notice the occurrences of the word 'rejected' in the first two readings; and the repeated mentions of 'faith' in the last two.

if the Lord wills, about suffering in relation to the will of God; and on Sunday afternoon, about suffering as it affects our Christian service.

Suffering as it concerns our faith

When I use the term *faith*, I mustn't forget that faith has two meanings. They go very well together, but there are two things which it denotes. There is on the one hand the great body of truth that we believe, *the objective faith*, 'the faith'—the doctrines we hold about God and about Christ and about our common salvation. And on the other side there is the *subjective* point of view. When I talk about faith, I can mean my own personal faith, my act of believing, my continuing belief in the Lord Jesus and in that great body of Christian doctrine, which is the faith.

Those two ideas are the two sides of one coin, are they not? But I want to separate them for a while and show that when suffering comes along it will impinge on both sides of faith. It may affect what we believe as a matter of doctrine; or it may affect our personal attitude towards the Lord, our personal, subjective believing, our faith.

False teachers

Consider for instance a situation that was now coming upon these early Christians. Many of them were being called upon to suffer for the sake of Christ, but the matter had become further complicated because certain false teachers had been in their area teaching wrong doctrine. We learn that from the fact that Peter has to write and correct this matter, and point out to these believers that what the first evangelists preached to them was the truth.

Paul and Silas had been the evangelists who had first taken the gospel to these parts of Asia, Bithynia, Pontus, Galatia and Cappadocia. They had preached the doctrines of free and sovereign grace: that a man is saved by faith through grace apart from the works of the law. But after they went certain false teachers had come, and they had taught the believers that faith wasn't enough and grace wasn't enough; that if they would be saved they must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. They had caused no small trouble in that area, and it was a sad thing because now it complicated the issue.

So long as a man or woman is clear in his or her mind that the things they believe are God's solid truth, then there is a chance that that man or woman will be prepared to stand for them, and if need be to suffer for them. But once we let a doubt creep into our minds about the truths we are supposed to hold and we are no longer sure whether they are true or not, then, if we are called to face suffering for them, we shan't know which way to go, shall we? The very foundation of our courage will be broken up beneath our feet.

And it wasn't only that. The thing that these false teachers were teaching was that if you would be saved you must keep the law of Moses and be circumcised. And you know, that is a very tempting doctrine. You may not find it very tempting; you may think that it was a repulsive doctrine. You would rather be saved by free grace and not have to keep the law to be saved. But it didn't appear like that to these people. As Paul reminded them when he wrote, 'But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?' (Gal

5:11). 'If I were willing to be circumcised and if I still preached the Law, then all the offence of the past would cease and the Jews would no longer find fault with me.'

The fact is that this was the very issue that stirred up Jewish persecution against the Christians. You see, if you allow a man to think that he could keep the law to be saved, or that being circumcised somehow assisted him to be saved, then it sort of gives him a little bit of credit and he doesn't feel so bad about your message. But if you tell him that he is a total wreck, such an incorrigible sinner that not the law, nor circumcision, nor any act of his could possibly save him, then you stand a good chance of provoking his anger and he won't like you. We don't like being told we're wrecks, do we?

The Jewish authorities

Then it meant that all the pride they had in their former religion was collapsed and the Jews didn't take to that very kindly. They very soon got themselves busy. In Jerusalem itself, where the Jewish authorities were responsible to the Romans for seeing that order was kept, they couldn't do overmuch; though even there they managed to kill James and Stephen. But in the provinces, where the Jews were not responsible for keeping order, we read constantly in the Acts where they gathered riots together and set the city in an uproar and incited the Roman authorities against the Christians. Oh, if only those Christians could have agreed what was helpful and necessary, they could have escaped a lot of trouble. What a tempting doctrine it was; how tempting to compromise just there.

The gospel is about a Christ who has been rejected

Then these Christians were forced by their faith to preach that Jesus was the Son of God and that Jesus had been rejected by the nation and murdered. If only they could have got rid of that part of the message they would have been a lot more popular, both with Jew and Gentile. Every time they preached their Christian gospel, they preached a Christ that had been rejected, and the sting of that charge would go home to every Jewish nationalist. Why must they have such a faith as that, that upset people so? Couldn't they temper it down a bit, and get rid of this 'rejected' idea and the sufferings of Christ? If only they could, then the offence and the suffering might well have ceased.

Suffering caused them to doubt their faith

Then there grew another complication. Unless I am greatly mistaken, I fancy there were many Christians in those early days, when the persecutions descended on them thick and heavy, who cried to God to be delivered from it. Wouldn't you? If your loved ones were being hauled to prison, if you had somebody now at this very moment in Siberia being brainwashed, wouldn't you cry to God to intervene and get them out? And when God didn't intervene but let them suffer and let them die, I fancy there was many a heart that began to say, 'I wonder if Jesus is the Christ after all. How can he be the Christ?'

They may have come back to their Christian teachers and said, 'Look here, you say that Jesus has gone back to heaven and he is sitting on the very throne of God at this moment; why, then, does he let me suffer?'

And Peter would say, 'But I know that he has gone because I have seen him.'

But they'd say, 'We've never seen him, and it is hard to believe that he really is the Christ and he really is in heaven and he really is triumphant and he is actually sitting this moment on the throne of the heavens, when he doesn't lift a finger to get our people, our loved ones, out of prison and save them from death.'

Don't you think they might have been tempted that way round? Don't you think you might have been tempted, or are you made of tougher stuff than most people? I'm going to suggest that when suffering came to these people, it began to impinge very heavily on their faith, and made them think again very seriously as to whether the things they professed to believe were really true.

Some denied the Lord

And there would have been other people—we know that because we read of them in history. There were many early Christians who professed to love the Saviour, were baptised and in fellowship; but when they were faced with the realities of torture they broke down and denied the Lord. And then the church really had difficult days ahead of her and Christians searched their hearts as to what to do with such people. If they repented, should they have them back into assembly fellowship or should they keep them outside? There were long arguments and heated rows and divisions over this very topic in the early church.

There were some Christian leaders who said, 'No, if they once denied the Lord, we can't have them back in assembly fellowship. Perhaps they are true Christians but we are not going to have them back; we're going to keep them out.'

There were other Christians who said, 'Oh, but look, have mercy, do! They only relapsed temporarily. They are real believers, they are repentant; shall we not have them back?'

What would happen to you, do you think, if you were called to be tortured for Christ? Would your faith be strong enough? And what would you feel like if, like one of those early Christians in a weak moment, you couldn't face the rack and you denied the Lord?

And then you'll feel, 'Oh dear me, dear me, everything depends on my believing, doesn't it? The Bible says that the believer is secure, but look at me—I've acted like an unbeliever and I've denied my faith. Can I be saved?'

We talk merrily, don't we, about the eternal security of the believer? But that begs the question, 'Once I'm a believer, am I always a believer? What should happen if I were to lose my faith?'

Says Peter, 'You are kept by the power of God . . .' (1:5).

That's wonderful, Peter.

But he adds an expression that is perhaps a little bit uncomfortable just there, 'Kept by the power of God—*through faith*.'

But if a person's faith is in the very foundation doctrines of Christ and in the person of Christ, what will happen then? Will he still be kept? So this matter of suffering impinged very heavily in both directions on the faith of those early Christians.

Peter had been through the school of suffering

What I want to do is to try and take us together through Peter's ministry to those people. I think it is a delightful thing that God, who foresaw the suffering his people would have to pass through for their faith, had made preparation for them in the person of Peter. He had already taken Peter through the school of suffering, with all its ups and downs, and had so tested and tried Peter's faith that he in turn was ready with a shepherd heart to stand by those folk in the moment of their need, and so minister to them that they came through triumphant.

I like it in God that he gave us Peter as an instructor. If he'd given us Paul about this matter, then I would have said, 'Well, yes, Paul is a giant, you know. From the time he started out on his Christian pathway to the time he finished up, he didn't make any mistakes at all. He went through with flying colours. I don't think I could ever be a Paul!'

But he didn't give us Paul; he gave us Peter in this thing. Peter's a man that failed so lamentably over this very matter of suffering for Christ and that's what makes him such a sympathetic teacher. It is very difficult to be taught by somebody who always gets ten out of ten himself. He never sees the difficulties and he doesn't take too kindly to us who stumble along with four or five out of ten. And we feel ourselves such fools then, trying to learn. We are ashamed of our mistakes and we get all embarrassed. But if we have somebody who gets six out of ten, and we only get four, he is not that much better than we are and we find him a better teacher, don't we? When it comes to this most intimate, personal matter of suffering for Christ, God has given us Peter, the man who made such grievous mistakes and yet repented and learned his lesson and was restored, and when he turned again he was able to stand with his brethren.

So let's take the first thing: Peter's lesson about faith—that is, *the faith*.

Peter found it difficult to accept that Christ would be rejected

Peter too has his difficulties about the whole concept of a suffering Christ. We have read of that great occasion when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. And then the Lord began to introduce this lesson about suffering and to teach them how he must go to Jerusalem, suffer and be rejected. 'Oh no,' said Peter, 'may that be far from you, Lord' (see Mark 8:27–33). It seemed to contradict Peter's whole conception of the Christ. You can't have a rejected Christ; it didn't make sense to Peter.

We've grown up with the idea of a suffering Christ, haven't we? Born and bred in a Christian country, we have long since seen that the sufferings of Christ are the very heart of the Christian gospel. But put yourself in Peter's shoes for a moment. He didn't at that stage understand anything about the atonement and the sacrifice of Christ, but he did believe that Jesus was the Son of God and he did believe he was Messiah. In Peter's enthusiastic mind that meant that very soon our Lord would go to the headquarters in Jerusalem and he would convince the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and some of Samaritans would agree, 'Yes, this is the Messiah,' and the Lord would be given his throne of David, marshal his armies, clear out the Romans and he would reign. That is what it meant to be *the Christ*.

Now he was talking about going to Jerusalem and being rejected. How can you have a rejected Christ? The thing just doesn't make sense. How can you have a dead Christ? Defeat for Christ is a contradiction in terms, and Peter rebuked the Lord. It was perhaps understandable, and I say again this must have been a very big puzzle to many a Christian later on.

It is all right to sit inside a church and say, 'Yes, I believe that Christ died; he died for my sins and I know my sins are forgiven.' If you are in a prison cell with the threat of the guillotine hanging over you and you cry to be delivered, and you watch other Christians being tortured to death, then you may say, 'Well, I've never seen this Christ. He is the Christ, isn't he, and he is supposed to be raised from the dead? Hasn't he got supreme power in heaven now? Well, if he does, why doesn't he move and get us out? Fancy letting us die and be defeated like this!'

It would have been to many a contradiction in terms. I've had Jews tell me, sincere thinking Jews, 'Your Jesus can't be the Christ. The fact that he died, was killed and couldn't help himself, and was put in a tomb, shows that he wasn't the Christ. How can you make out that he was the Christ when he has been defeated?'

Those thoughts were going through Peter's mind on that great day. 'No, Lord,' he said, 'I can't have this, that you will be rejected.'

And now Peter is standing by his fellow Christians. I like the man's grace. Here were these folk suffering for their faith, suffering because they had stood by a Lord that was rejected. As Peter wrote, 'You come to him, a living stone rejected by men' (1 Pet 2:4), I wonder if a tear sprang to his eyes, recalling back to his mind the day he stood in front of Christ and had the audacity to rebuke the Lord. Now the very phrase he objected to, he is writing to his fellow believers, 'You've come to a Christ *who is rejected indeed*.'

How did Peter get over the crisis? How did he come to accept this fact that Jesus is rejected, Christ must suffer, and still manage to believe? He tells us, 'You know, it wasn't many days after that that the Lord Jesus took us up the transfiguration mountain. When we got up there we found there was another world and though you may be rejected down here, it's all right there' (see Mark 9:2-8).

'And do you know,' he says, 'when we were coming down again the Lord said that the Pharisees were going to examine his claims and reject them. We were brought up to believe that the scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat and when they said anything it must be right because they said it. They were the men who knew all about the Old Testament, and we were brought up from kiddies to believe them. They preached in our synagogues and when they expounded the Bible we really took it for granted that what they were saying was what Moses and the Prophets meant. They knew Hebrew and were great theologians; for those learned men to examine the claims of Jesus and say they were all wrong, that was a terrible blow to us simple fishermen.'

You can understand, can't you, why Peter was a bit troubled and began to rebuke the Lord?

'But I've got over that,' said Peter, 'for the Lord took me up the mountain and there, instead of the Pharisees and the scribes interpreting the law of Moses, we saw Moses himself, and we saw Elijah himself, the greatest of the prophets. Those Pharisees must be

wrong in the way they are interpreting the Bible, because Moses and Elijah were with Christ. They were praying with him. They were talking with him and we heard Moses and Elijah discuss his *exodus*, his death at Jerusalem, quite in agreement that Jesus was the Christ and he must suffer.

That sent us back to our Bible to look at it for ourselves. Now we didn't need to take it for granted any more when the Pharisees and the scribes and the learned Sadducees rejected the claims of Jesus and said they were talking on behalf of Moses, and theirs was the right interpretation. It opened our eyes, so that we went back ourselves to what Moses and the Prophets said. 'We did not follow cleverly devised myths,' says he in his second letter, 'we were eyewitnesses of his majesty' (1:16). It is the fact.

Believing even when you don't see

I can imagine some early Christian shaking his head and saying, 'It's all right for you, Peter, you saw it. We haven't seen it. If it's true, why doesn't God give us some great vision like you had and show us too?'

Peter hasn't forgotten this difficulty. Wasn't he in the upper room when our Lord came in the door and spoke to Thomas, and said, 'Thomas, because you have seen, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:29).

Peter is thinking about those Christians away in Cappadocia and Bithynia and he knows what's going through their hearts. 'I know, dear brothers and sisters, that I saw it and you didn't, but that is the wonderful thing about you: your faith is better than my faith.'

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. (1 Pet 1:8)

'You believe even though you haven't seen!'

But that is a hard thing to do, isn't it? How can we be honest and believe?

Says Peter, 'I can give you something more than my own experience up the mount. Blessed as that was, I can prove to you that the sufferings of Christ are prophesied in Scripture.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and enquired carefully, enquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. (vv. 10–12)

'Come now, maybe you haven't seen the Lord in glory, but he has left you a book, and perhaps the witness of Scripture is even more powerful than the witness of that vision up the mountain, for the vision by itself might have been imagination but the book isn't imagination, is it? Come and get our book and let me show you that, instead of the sufferings of Christ being something we could be ashamed of and think that they spell defeat, the sufferings of Christ are the very things that prove he is God's son.'

‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer’ (see Luke 24:46; Ps 22). How tellingly throughout his whole ministry Peter used the argument. Here in his first epistle in chapter 2 he ends up with that great prophecy from Isaiah 53:5 that tells so significantly of the Holy Spirit foretelling the suffering of Christ (v. 24). There it is my fellow believers, on the page of Scripture, calmly telling all down these centuries that the Christ should suffer.

The importance of knowing the Old Testament

I want to talk to my fellow young believers—the old ones know this. You would be doing yourself a tremendous service in your young days, when you may not know much about suffering of any sort, if you were to go through your Old Testament and seek out all those passages that prophesy the coming of Christ, the sufferings that were to be his and the glories that should follow.

You say, ‘I’ve no need to do that. I believe he is the Son of God.’

I know you do. But maybe when the heat of life gets on you and you’re called upon to suffer for Christ in any fashion, you will find you need something to get hold of to convince your soul that, in spite of all the suffering, Jesus is still the Christ.

I could think of early Christians saying, ‘Peter, you say that Jesus Christ suffered, and that fulfilled Scripture?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now he is risen again and the suffering is over?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, now that the suffering has all been fulfilled, why doesn’t he come and bless and deliver me from my suffering? You say that he had to suffer because he had to die for my sins and I agree with that. You say that his sacrifice is complete?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, what is stopping him now? Why doesn’t he come again and save me?’

I can hear Peter answering that, though he doesn’t write it within his Epistles. ‘You have no need to despair here either. The Old Testament not only says that the Christ has to suffer for our sins and be raised again, but the Old Testament also said that there would be a while that he was sitting on the right hand of God.’

‘The Lord said unto my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, *until . . .*”’ So the Old Testament said not merely that he must suffer, not merely that he must rise again, but the Old Testament said there would be a period—and how long we are not told—where he would be sitting at the right hand of God, ‘. . . “*until I make your enemies your footstool*”’ (Ps 110:1).

Christ can’t come at once to take you; he’ll be sitting there until that happens. Things are not going wrong; the programme hasn’t been upset; it is happening as the Scriptures said it would happen. So long as he sits there until his enemies are made his footstool, and so long as he is agreeing with Scripture, the plan has not gone awry.

But you say, ‘Why must he sit? Why can’t he come?’

Because of his enemies—if he came right now there would be multitudes that wouldn’t be saved. If he had come at once you wouldn’t have been saved, would you? There must be a while when Christ is still rejected, so that we might have the chance to come personally to

him and by the exercise of faith to be joined to him, 'a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious' (1 Pet 2:4).

You see, if Christ came down now in brilliant glory and stood out there, people would turn out and they would sing 'hallelujah'; I don't doubt it. And if he had come down to our earth in a blaze of his divine splendour with armies of angels following behind on white horses, the whole world would have gone out and said, 'Yes, we believe.'

For what reason was Christ rejected?

That wouldn't have been that much good; not *that* much. Have you ever thought through why Jesus said he must be rejected? Why did it have to be that way – why be rejected? Why didn't he die for our sins without being rejected?

When you ask that question, you have touched something very practical and fundamental. He was rejected for this reason: our thoughts as sinful men and women are not God's thoughts and our ways are not his ways (Isa 55:8). It was inevitable before Christ came that men should reject him. They didn't agree with what he said and they didn't like what he thought. He was rejected by men because he didn't fit in with their schemes. Oh, they would have loved his drama and they would have loved his glory, but at heart they didn't believe him and they didn't love him.

'So,' says God, 'if we are going to get this straight, you must have my Son in lowly fashion (see Phil 2:8). And, if you would be saved, you must come to this man that the human heart naturally rejects. You must be willing to let your ideas go and be fitted into him, coming to him as to a stone rejected of men.'

What an act of faith that is. I have got to come to him and listen to what he says and make up my mind. Am I going to bow, am I going to repent, am I going to believe him? Or am I going to disagree with him? I have got to face that question while he is still rejected, even when I haven't seen his glory. There is no fuss to entice me on, no blowing of trumpets, no great excitement; I have got to face him and all he stood for and make my choice.

Faith and sight

God has deliberately had it that way. They tell me that when we get home to heaven faith is going to give place to sight; but I very much doubt it, you know – I very much doubt it. Oh, I believe we shall see the Lord; don't get me wrong, we shall see the Lord. We shall still have to trust him, though, shan't we?

You good husbands, you see your wives very much, don't you? Don't you still have to trust them, or have you given up believing in your wives? You couldn't live together unless you were prepared to believe, though you can see them.

And when we get home to heaven we shall still have to trust the Lord. When you are directing your ten cities and I'm perhaps directing my little street of houses somewhere, we shall still have to depend on the Lord and trust him, agree with everything he says, and say, 'Yes, that's right.' Being in heaven is not a matter of galloping around on big white horses and walking on streets of gold and all that kind of thing, without any exercise of our faith.

This is vital. You can leave the glory, you can forget all about that gold and the pearls and the lovely gates; they are only the extras and the additions. This is the vital thing: that

we are joined to Christ by faith, which means we are agreeing with him. We need to say, 'I am not getting it right, I have got to change. I can see now that I'm wrong and God is right. This is of God, and what he says is perfectly true. I'm sure that is what God is like and what God would have me to do.' We have got to be joined to him or it'll be too late when he comes in glory for that kind of thing.

There are many folks who say, 'If I could see I would believe,' but *the whole point of the relationship with God is that we believe when we can't see—that is what faith is*. It is no accident that the Lord hasn't come yet, for this is a vital part of our spiritual experience: learning to believe him when everybody in the world disagrees with him. It would be comparatively very easy to believe in him in heaven, because they all agree with him up there and you'll be very popular. It's a harder thing to believe in him in a world that rejects him.

And so Peter stood by his fellow Christians to buttress their faith that Jesus was the Christ, even though he is rejected of men, has suffered and died, and has gone back to heaven, where he still waits and hasn't returned.

Faith tested

But, as I said, there is another side to this business.

There are many folks who believe all the facts about the Lord Jesus and yet, when they are put to the test, their courage fails them and their faith wavers. Didn't it happen with Peter? When the Lord took him up the mountain and in the subsequent days taught him valuable lessons, revealing himself to him, Peter felt his faith growing and growing and growing till at last, when the Lord announced at the Last Supper that he was going to die, Peter said, 'Well, if it is necessary I'll die with you. I really believe now' (see Mark 14:29–31).

Almost the last words the apostles spoke as they went over the Kidron Valley and the Lord entered Gethsemane were,

Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God. (John 16:29–30)

And the Lord turned round and said, 'Do you? —do you now believe? In a very few moments all of you be scattered to your homes. You don't believe like you think you do' (vv. 31–33).

A few hours later Peter was found using all the swear words he knew to prove to the folks around that he didn't believe at all. What distress and mental anguish it brought on him. What was it that went wrong? Why did he so suddenly come such a cropper? Could he any longer regard himself as a true believer? If he wasn't a believer, had he lost his eternal life? Would the Lord have him back? What anguish must have gone through that man's heart!

What was happening? Peter explains it to the believers in his letter, because the same kind of thing would happen to them in varying degrees and it would help them if they knew and understood what God was really doing.

Peter's faith never broke, for on the night when the Lord announced that they would all be tested and tried he said to Peter, 'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail' (Luke 22:32). Our Lord knew a hidden weakness was there. Already, before the trial came, our Lord prayed that his faith wouldn't fail. Everything else failed, you know: his zeal failed, his godliness failed, his testimony went bang; but his faith didn't fail.

Why did our Lord allow that? I think Peter gives the answer. He describes this process that many believers go through—perhaps all of us—as being like a refiner's fire:

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 1:7 KJV)

To get across to you what Peter really means, I shall have to ask you to think a little bit about Greek words. I know it is an awful horror when preachers use Greek words, but there you are! The word he used for *trial* doesn't mean the *process* of trying. It is a mistranslation really, and you might see that for yourselves. The process of trying isn't precious; it is very painful. When a goldsmith gets a bit of gold and puts it into the fire, the process of trying it is not precious. You wouldn't speak of that as precious, would you? What is it that is precious? It's the thing that comes out at the end that is the precious thing.

And that is precisely what the Greek word means. Not the trial of the faith, but the proved part—the piece that comes out at the end and is proved genuine. The solid gold, the proved part of your faith, is precious.

When a goldsmith takes a big lump of gold he looks at it and says, 'This is a valuable piece of metal; but there is a lot of alloy in there that isn't real gold at all. It is dross, really, and I don't want that dross. It isn't any good; it looks nice and shiny and big but it isn't genuine. So I'll put it all into the crucible and when I heat it the scum will come out to the surface. I'm going to skim it off and when there is no scum left I'll take the gold out, the real gold.'

I can imagine somebody who didn't know that fact, standing by the goldsmith and watching the bit go in. When the job is finished he watches the goldsmith taking it out again, and says, 'Oh, look what you have done. You have lost something; the thing isn't anywhere near so big as when it went in.'

And the goldsmith would say, 'Ah, yes, you see, gold perishes; it loses something when it goes into the fire, but I wouldn't worry about that. The stuff that's lost is no use at all. I know it is smaller than when it went in, but it is far more valuable because it is all the genuine stuff, and it is precious.'

Says Peter, 'That is what the Lord does to our faith.'

Mixed in with our faith is a lot of dross that goes by the name of faith but isn't faith at all. God allows suffering to come, to cleanse out that dross and purify our faith. He knows our faith is valuable and he watches the fire. If need be, he prays that our faith doesn't fail. Not a tiny gram of gold will be spoiled, but he is prepared to let the fire burn, to remove from our faith the dross.

What it means in practical terms

Let me give you a few illustrations as I close.

There was Peter himself, he did really believe. Yes, he honestly believed when he said that he would die with the Lord. But, you know, mixed up with his faith was a lot of purely human zeal that wasn't worth that much. He believed that the strength behind that faith was, in great part, just natural courage; the kind of stuff that makes one man a conservative or a communist and he'll go to the end of the earth for it. That isn't faith; it's just natural courage. And if Peter's faith was going to be valuable, it must be unmixed.

What a sad and sorry thing, and how painful it seemed to be, as the fires came along and ate out all the excitement and the human zeal. But it led to genuine faith—the man, they tell us, was crucified upside down in the end.

Sometimes when people get saved, as with us all, genuine faith is there. *Genuine faith*. But mixed in with it sometimes there is a lot of excitement, and perhaps a lot of group pressure from folks about us, and we want a suitable atmosphere to get saved in. Presently the Lord will take those favourable things away and he'll put us through such experiences that begin to burn away the excitement, and he'll leave us without the shelter. Perhaps what we thought was faith we shall find out was merely emotion and a nice feeling inside. 'Isn't it lovely to be a Christian! I believe and I'm happy all the day.' When that is gone we can be decidedly uncomfortable, and the Lord is purging out what isn't faith so that the real faith remains.

Or then again, you know that very often, in what goes as faith, there is a lot of what psychologists would call *group psychology*. Have you ever known a young man to be brought up in a strict environment, when his whole attitude to the world is governed by what he has been taught from a toddler? He is forbidden to do this and that, and taught that some things are sinful and wicked, so he abstains. He would be afraid not to; pressure has been put on so hard.

But he hasn't thought the thing out for himself. He abstains from doing such things not because he has really brought it to the word of God and said, 'I see there from the Bible that that thing is wrong and I can tell you what is wrong about it. It is sinful because of this and this and this.'

No, he hasn't thought it out himself; he is just doing it because pressure has been brought to bear on him over the years not to do it.

Presently his job takes him away to somewhere abroad and there is no Christian fellowship. No one sees him and he's into the world head over heels before he knows where he is. Why is that? Because what he first had wasn't real faith; it was only group psychology, group pressure, not genuine faith. Sometimes the Lord has to let it all be burnt up until, by grim experience, he is brought back to the Scriptures to work it out for himself.

The challenge for the early Christians

It was so with these early Christians. Imagine the difficulty they had being brought up in synagogues under very learned rabbis, and the rabbis had laid down the law. They said they weren't to eat with Gentiles; it was wicked to do that and they weren't to do it. Now here

were these apostles coming along saying that it's all right to eat with Gentiles and they were to do it. Where would they find themselves?

It is easy for you. You were never brought up under a Jewish rabbi. Think of the tremendous emotional conflict, with all the work of society that had been beaten into them over the years. They daren't scarcely look twice at the rabbi; if he rebuked them they shook in their very shoes. And now the Christian preachers were coming along and telling them a lot of that was nonsense. A lot of those rules and regulations that the Pharisees made up weren't in the Bible anyway. Now they'd have a problem, wouldn't they? What distress of mind and discomfort and bewilderment they'd go through. Who were they going to believe?

In the end, however, it was good, for what they had merely taken from authority before, just because the rabbi said so, now they would have to get for themselves from their books. Says Peter, '[they] have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours' (2 Pet 1:1).

Mind you, young folk, I'm not telling you to disobey your elders, but I am telling you to examine this book for yourselves.

Have you seen the terrible reports in our national newspapers about some of our dearly beloved brothers, called Exclusives?² I met some of them recently in England. What heartbreak some of them have been through. They were brought up from their youth to believe that certain church practices were the very word of God and they daren't go against them because they would be thrown right out and cut off from their families.

Now they have found their leaders teaching such absurd things that they can no longer believe it is the word of God. They're beginning to look again, and to their amazement they are finding a lot of what they were taught under sanction as being God's will is all nonsense and not in the Bible at all.

What a period of suffering they are going through. We need to pray for them, don't we? The Lord is letting the fires of their suffering eat out what was just mere pharisaism and bringing them back to what is genuine faith in his declared word.

All of us shall go through that time. Hang on to what we have been taught that is of God; hang on with might and main to that personal faith, as the Lord teaches us it's true, and thank God for the rich heritage which our forefathers have left us.

But, on the other hand, come personally to his word and let him burn out what isn't genuine faith but our imagination and our inclinations, so that, when he is finished, we may believe with a faith that's direct—a personal, deliberate response to the Lord's personal revelation to us. And that is worthwhile. It's worthwhile!

I was speaking just at Easter time with a young man who was brought up in a Christian home to believe this book was the word of God. Why it was, he didn't quite know. But then, his Sunday school teacher had told him it was, and his mother had told him it was, and his father had told him it was, and the elders in the meeting had said it was, so it must be. He knew in the back of his mind that if he said it wasn't all true they would put him out of fellowship, but why it was the word of God and how you could prove it, he didn't know.

² 'The Exclusive Taylorites', *The Spectator*, 6 August 1964, p.8.

He grew up. He arrived at the Sixth Form and took religious instruction, and every period of instruction he got the teacher pumped him full with modernism. He brought it to his elders and they couldn't help him much. They brought him to talk with me and I couldn't help him much either. The young man was in utter misery and didn't know what to believe. He didn't know where he was, he had no arguments to bring against his school teacher.

He felt he must withdraw from fellowship. He couldn't any longer believe like his parents believed and like the other Christians believed. With a sad heart his parents let him go off to university. They prayed, of course, and I suppose the elders prayed like the Lord prayed for Peter, that in it all the man's faith shouldn't fail.

I saw him at Easter, and what a delight it was to see him, radiant once more, for love had brought him through. A love he first believed because his parents said so, and what he first believed because he was afraid if he didn't believe he'd get thrown out of the assembly—now he believed because he had found it for himself in God's word and God had told him.

What a triumph. I might tell you he is a much humbler man now. There isn't that same boastfulness in his learning as there was before, nor does he despise learning; but he is a young man from whom the Lord has burned a good deal of his presumption and made him a sincere believer in his revealed word.

The Lord encourage us all and give us the patience to study his word, so that we may get a firm grip upon it. May he so give us grace and understanding in the trials of life that we may see what the Lord is doing, and through all the trials our faith will not fail and we will be brought through triumphant and found unblameable at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Shall we pray:

Now, Lord, we bring thy holy word to thee. We thank thee for it and for all its encouragement. We thank thee for those who have gone along the trail before us and blazed its way. We thank thee for those pioneers of Christian experience like Peter and the early Christians. We count it an honour to follow in their footsteps.

We thank thee for speaking to us and causing us to see that thy Son is indeed thy Son and our Saviour. Thank thee for bringing us to him so that we can honestly say that we believe and are sure that he is the Christ, the Son of God. O Lord, we praise thee for thy grace.

We thank thee for the intercession of Christ, and that through this our faith shall not fail. Oh Lord, in many things we are inconsistent and much of our faith, we must confess before thee, is worthless. We ask only grace of thee that thou wilt help us burn out the dross. Give us grace to stand it, so that our faith shall not fail but grow brighter and come through to thy praise.

We thank thee for what it is to know that our faith in thee is a precious thing, more precious than gold, and thou wilt never let it be destroyed. Give us a similar heart and love for our fellow Christians, that we may pray for them in turn through their difficult

times and do all in our power not to undermine but to establish their faith, that thy people may be strong. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Suffering in Relation to the Will of God

Reading: Mark 14:26–38

I want us with God's help to study this first passage for a while, for here Peter is in school, learning the necessary preparations for anyone who is about to be called on to suffer for the Lord.

Shall we notice in this short passage the *two different attitudes* that are shown towards suffering, one by Peter and the other by Christ, and the *two different necessities* by which their respective lives were run.

Peter had the misfortune, or shall I call it the honour, of having his life compared with the life of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps God chose him for that great occasion because his life was better than the others. Certainly none of us would measure up to Peter's standard. And yet, if you take the very best of men and put them alongside the Lord Jesus, inevitably you'll see there is a tremendous gap between them. And so it is apparent here in the hours just before the time of Christ's suffering.

Peter's attitude

'Lord, I'm ready to suffer and if I must die, well, never mind, I'm ready for it!' said Peter.

Christ's attitude

Oh, how strangely unlike that was the Lord. As he went forward into the Garden, instead of bowing his knee and saying, 'Father, I am ready for it; this is the great occasion, let it come, I'm ready,' he bowed his knees and prayed the strongest prayer that perhaps he'd ever prayed, put skilfully in his words to appeal to the very heart of God and to his power.

He said not just 'Father,' but 'Abba, Father,' appealing to God's fatherly heart— 'you love me, Father.' And then his realistic prayer—'remove this cup from me' (v. 36). 'Father take it away from me; I don't want to face it.'

The necessity governing Peter

But then look again. Peter wasn't as ready as he appeared to be, and that was for a very good reason, for if you listen to him speak you will see presently the *necessity* that was governing his life.

'Lord,' said he, 'if I must die with you . . .' (v. 31). What did he mean *must*? It is a very good thing for us all, in every circumstance in which we find ourselves, to examine that little word 'must'. We use it a lot, don't we? 'I must do this and I must have that.' Why 'must'? It

is a very good thing to examine the necessities that drive our lives. And what was Peter thinking of, I wonder, when he said, 'If I must'? Who should say must?

I hope I do him no wrong, but from what follows it would appear that the 'must' Peter was thinking of was merely *the must of circumstance*: 'If circumstances so come round that they force me to face death for you, then I'm ready for it.'

But more often than not, you know, if we want to, there is a way out of circumstance. When the time came Peter found that circumstances didn't make it imperative and there was a way out. If you are merely considering circumstances, you needn't suffer.

The necessity governing Christ

Again how unlike the Lord he is. He watched the Lord praying honestly but realistically, meaning what he said, 'Father, let it pass. I don't want to do it. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' And that's an altogether different necessity; not now mere circumstances, mere chance, but *the overriding necessity and compulsion of the will of God*.

Rising from prayer, our Lord came to Peter and found him sleeping. He said to Peter, 'Are you asleep? Don't you know that if you are going to be called to suffer for me and for God there is preparation necessary? Your feelings are not enough, Peter. You feel ruled by a sense of loyalty, a sense of gallantry, a sense of the adventure of it all and the challenge of the situation, and all that would appeal to a manly heart—a courageous, manly heart. But you know, Peter, feelings are not enough; they won't carry a man far enough.'

If we are going to work for the Lord, and if we are going to be called upon to suffer for him, we shall need something more than just feelings. We shall need such an overriding sense of the will of God, and the predominance of that will in our lives, that we should be prepared to follow that will, even if the sky fell on the earth. Whether we felt well or didn't feel well, and whether we wanted to or didn't want to, whether we found it enjoyable or indescribably horrible, if it is the will of God, then it must be done.

Feelings are not enough, and a person doesn't come to have that sense of the will of God without a preliminary discipline, prayer and waiting on God. Oh, that we would know more about this.

What motivates us to work for the Lord?

Mark, who elaborates this point, is the writer to whom it was given to sketch the Lord as God's great servant. We do well on times, do we not, to ask ourselves what is the motive that ties us to the Lord's work? Is it merely that there is no one else to do it and circumstances make it impossible for us to get out of it? Or is it that we come like the Lord did to the Lord's work—whether we enjoy doing it or don't enjoy doing it—because it is burned in upon our hearts that this is God's will?

How shall we come to know God's will, and how shall it come to be paramount in our lives and we do it? Now let us be clear just here. We sometimes hear Christians and Christian preachers talking about God breaking our wills. He doesn't, you know—does he? God is not out to break our wills; that would be a foolish thing to do. We know what people mean when they talk about God breaking our wills. They mean that he brings us to the point

where he shatters our desire to have our own way and from then on we desire his will. But that is not breaking our wills. If God broke our wills we shouldn't have any wills left, and we should be flabby flatfish! God wants men and women who have an extremely strong will, and are willing to do his will.

If you have a car and you want it to go forwards and the thing persists in going backwards, you don't get a hammer and smash the gears, do you? No, you change it out of that gear into the other gear and, instead of going into reverse, it goes forward. If you smashed the gears and smashed the engine, it wouldn't go at all.

And so we watch God in Peter's life, using these sad events to teach that man what are the necessary preparations for a heart that is going to suffer for God, and bringing Peter round to desire the will of God, even though it means suffering.

Peter has learned his lesson

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1 Pet: 3:13–18)

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions *but for the will of God*. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

Therefore let those who suffer *according to God's will* entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (4:1–6, 19)

How lovely it is to read those words written by the pen of Peter. Peter has suffered much from preachers, who have written large the man's mistakes and shortcomings. How pleasant it is to find that Peter, though he made his mistakes, learned his lessons well. Writing now to his fellow believers to fortify them against the suffering that was about to descend, he wisely introduces them to the very key to the situation. 'My dear believers, *align yourselves with the will of God*; it is the only thing that will take you through this.'

A problem

Consider the situation for a moment. Here are people who have recently come to the Christian faith. Peter himself in fact reminds them what the Old Testament tells them:

For 'Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? (1 Pet 3:10–13; cf. Ps 34:12–16)

Oh, how lovely the Scripture sounded. There you are; you get saved, you turn to the Lord, you drop your evil habits of guile and wickedness and seek peace. If you pursue and go on with God, there is long life and good days.

They got converted and they did their best to live for the Lord, and then some of them got brutally thrown to the lions. What sense will you make of that? They weren't perfect, of course, but compared with the unsaved around them, they were beautifully-charactered people; people redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, in whose lives the fruit of the Holy Spirit was beginning to be seen in abundance. And it seemed a cruel mockery that such people should be recklessly thrown to the lions. What did it all mean? Was God any more reliable?

What are we to think? That God no longer has his eyes on the righteous, and this ghastly persecution of the Christians is all one colossal mistake and things have got out of hand and God can't control it anymore? If that were true, how terribly it would exaggerate the suffering, wouldn't it? To believe it was all one colossal accident and God had lost control, then life would become meaningless.

What are the other alternatives? Can you really think it was God's will that these people, though they had professed Christianity, should be persecuted and lose their lives, some of them in the most tortuous manner? Could it be God's will? They'd need to make up their minds before they got led from the prison out into the arena to face the lions. Why were they doing this thing? Was this really the will of God for them?

'How could it be?' you say.

And to Peter is given the task of explaining to them how it might at times be the will of God that they should suffer, even face terrifying death.

Perhaps we may not be called to suffer to any such extent, but we shall meet suffering of one sort and another in the path of life. If we have got it into our heads that, because some of the Old Testament psalms preach that if you behave well before the Lord and try to please him, he'll grant you long life and his blessings, our faith is going to be shattered if trouble comes upon us and it seems to upset the promise.

During the war I heard of one devout Christian man in England. He had a son; the son joined up in the army and the father prayed for the great promise, 'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty' (Ps 91:1). He really took the Bible to

mean that his son wouldn't be killed. And then one day the message came that the boy had been killed at the front. It shattered his faith.

How could it be the will of God?

When suffering hits us, and when it doesn't go as we think it ought to go, and we've really wanted to please the Lord, how easily our hearts begin to wonder, 'Is this all I get for pleasing the Lord? There's many a man outside in the world and he is living his life carelessly, and all goes swimmingly. And here I am, I've honestly tried to please the Lord and serve him by giving him a lot of time, and I've tried bringing up my family to his glory—and then this kind of thing comes to me.'

All this is very real, isn't it? How hard it is sometimes to bring ourselves round to face it, that this very difficult ugly patch of suffering might really be the will of God. Then, if only we could believe it, what a tower of strength it will be for us. Do we seek the grace of God to pray, 'Lord, let it pass, please let it pass; but nevertheless if it is your will, I want it'?

The same pattern that Christ suffered—innocent suffering

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet 2:18–25)

Peter is having a word with servants, household servants, many of them slaves. He is pointing out that Christ has left them an example in this matter of suffering; that in fact they are called to suffer in the same pattern as Christ suffered. As we scan down the paragraph we observe it is a question of innocent suffering. The Authorised Version and some of the English translations have confused the issues just a bit. In verse 20, 'For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer *for it*, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God', you will notice 'for it' is in italics—there are no words, 'for it'.

I never knew a slave master yet to beat and buffet his servants because they did well. I've known slave masters to beat their servants in spite of the fact that their servants did well, but I have never yet met or heard of a slave master so senseless as to beat his servants because they did well.

Peter is not talking of suffering *because we do well*—he is going to mention that in chapter 3, and we shall consider it presently. But in this chapter, he is talking about being buffeted *in spite of doing your very best*. 'You can expect to be buffeted if you do evil,' says Peter to the

slaves. But how hard it is to have your master so unappreciative that he beats you in spite of the fact that you have done your very best.

Though we are not slaves we all know what that is, don't we? When you labour long and hard to please somebody: your boss at work, your wife at home—I don't mean there is any similarity!—and instead of getting thanks and appreciation, you meet with fault-finding and verbal buffeting.

Says Peter to the slaves, 'I want you please to notice that you are called in this kind of situation to suffer, just as Christ suffered innocently. He has left us an example; when he was reviled, he reviled not again. After a life full of doing good works they reviled him, and they spat on him, and they scourged him. And yet, when they had so maltreated him in spite of his good works, he bore it patiently. Says Peter, 'When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he didn't threaten them with all the things that he would do to them.'

Why didn't he?

Says Peter, 'I'll tell you why he didn't. Because he was looking beyond the immediate to the possibility of saving people. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." He had a great objective in view. If he turned round and threatened these men, called down God's judgments on them and wrestled to get free from them, he might have succeeded there but you wouldn't have been saved, would you? And so the Lord faced that suffering and took it patiently because of the great possibility that by that very means he might bring you to God and save you from your sins. Christ also has suffered like that, leaving you an example, "so that you should follow in his steps.'"

Please observe that Peter is writing to Christians. He is not writing to unsaved folk, telling them that the way to be saved is to follow Christ as an example. That is an impossibility for them to do. But he is writing to Christian men and women, pointing out that, just as Christ was prepared to put up with innocent suffering so that he might save people, we too are called to that same attitude.

You could say, 'My sufferings will never save anybody, will they?'

There is a great possibility that they might. Here is a nurse on duty, and the sister in charge is sometimes sharp and terribly impatient. I suppose their great responsibility and the long hours they work, and the difficult jobs they do make them a bit short of temper at times. The nurse who suffers under it unjustly when she has done her best has got every right to protest that this is most unjust and unreasonable, hasn't she? She has the possibility to do so, but I'm not going to lay the law down and say what she should do.

I merely point out that there is a possibility in that kind of situation to look beyond the suffering it involves and say, 'No, I shall try to live in this situation for the glory of God and for Christ's sake, so that I might be a testimony. If I still work at my very best, it may lead my fellow nurses to think and perhaps give me the opportunity of explaining to them where I get the grace from, and my courage and my patience, and why I put up with it. It may give me a chance to lead them to the Lord.'

I'm not going to preach that slavery is a right thing—slavery is a wicked thing. We mustn't think that Peter here is condoning slavery, comforting the slave masters, saying it is a very good thing and that slaves oughtn't to seek their freedom.

It was, in fact, Christianity as much as anything that eventually moved men to protest loudly against slavery and broke its authority and set men and women free. It would be an ugly slander on the name of Christianity to say it favoured the tyrant of a slave master, and if people were Christians they've got to accept the status quo. It isn't that. But in life there are some things bigger than other things. When Christianity first started in the pagan world, the whole pagan world was built on the institution of slavery. If Christians had started kicking against slavery in a world whose conscience scarcely questioned the institution, they would have brought the whole world down about their ears and people would have said, 'That is what you call Christianity, is it? It comes amongst men and women who are quite content and doing their job in life, and it discontents them and makes them rebels.' The gospel would have found it difficult to prosper then, wouldn't it?

Says Peter, 'For the Lord, for the testimony, for the love of souls, look beyond your personal suffering. If Christianity makes you a better slave, and gives you the power and the grit to work hard and, even if you have done your best and been complained about, to go on with it because in the last analysis you are working for God—that will be a tremendous credit to Christianity.'

As Christianity spread, eventually it broke slavery and set the slaves free. What a better way that was, but oh, how hard! I can imagine a slave saying, 'It's all right for these preachers, they move about from city to city and get entertained in the very best homes. There's Peter, you know, he comes to our place and he stays with Gaius. Well, Gaius has got a big house, he is very comfortable. He can get the whole church into one of his rooms, he's a wealthy man. Peter goes there and has a comfortable day, then he gets up at night and lectures and preaches to us and goes back to a comfortable home. It's all right for him to talk. Do you know what it's like to sweat your heart out and get nothing for it by way of money, to be a slave at everybody's beck and call, and then get lashed on the back by some half-tipsy slave master, even when you have done your very best? Peter doesn't know what it is like. It's all right for him!'

Perhaps Peter didn't know what it was like, but he has the wisdom to stand aside. 'My brothers,' he says, 'it is hard, and Christ found it hard. "When he was reviled, he didn't revile again," did he?'

Why not? 'He bore our sins in his body.' And when Christ bore our sins in his body, they wrecked his body, didn't they? 'He put up with it,' says Peter. 'He put up with it for you, and he put up with it uncomplainingly.'

His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind. (Isa 52:14)

It wasn't merely the lash that they wrapped around his body and the nails that they put through His hands, but in those hours of darkness he bore our sins in his body on the tree (1 Pet 2:24).

'It was all unjust,' you say.

Well, so it was, but he had his eye on this, that by suffering perhaps you could be brought to God. You are saved now, aren't you? So he has left us an example and we follow his steps.

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. (3:1-2)

'And then, you good Christian wives,' said Peter—and here I must stand aside and let Peter speak, for this is really out of my province. When it came to living in the ancient world with husbands who were not converted, that must have been an exceedingly difficult job. More often than not the husband coming home drunk; never taking his wife out to dinner; divorce perilously easy—and if you got divorced in an ancient city in the East, you'd be far better dead.

'Now,' he says, 'in the home, be subject to men like that because you too have an opportunity. Perhaps by your behaviour a man who wouldn't listen to the gospel in a gospel meeting might be won at home by the behaviour of the wife.'

You may think that this is all a long time ago and things have changed now, but I remember talking on this passage once in a meeting a long, long way from here. As I talked I noticed one good sister near the front of the hall and her eyes began to fill with tears. They told me later that she had got saved after her marriage—her husband wasn't saved and neither was she when they married—and naturally she tried to win her husband to the Lord but he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't come to the meetings; he wouldn't listen to the gospel. He was a good fellow but he just would not listen.

One day, in sheer desperation, the good woman prayed, 'O Lord, if it means losing the baby, make my husband think, to bring him to salvation.' Presently that little baby, that innocent babe, grew ill and they took it to hospital. And then they had to take it to a hospital in another town and it grew so ill that the parents had to go and stay there. They stayed in a Christian home. In the end the baby died and the father in his distress was made to think, and he found the Lord. I say nothing about whether women ought to do such things, but there was a woman who was prepared to suffer so that somebody should get saved.

When it comes to the will of God, there is a great possibility that it can be God's will to allow innocent suffering—suffering by people who didn't deserve it and have every right to complain—in order that men and women might be brought to Christ. Of course, we can't atone for their sins as Christ did in his sufferings, but we have the chance by suffering so to please God and advertise his gospel that they might seek the Lord.

Choosing to suffer for doing good because you are a Christian

There is another side to it, and that is the side we read about in chapter 3: 'For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil' (v. 17). This is not innocent suffering, in the sense that you have done good and haven't done bad; this is suffering because you insist on doing good.

If you stopped doing good, if you decided not to do good, then you wouldn't suffer. But if you know that something is good and righteous, and you insist on doing it because it is God's will for you to do what's right, *you do it in spite of the fact that you know you are going to suffer for doing it*. And the thing that is perhaps uppermost in Peter's mind is this question of always being ready to make a Christian confession.

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. (vv. 14–15)

What must it have cost Peter to write that line? It was the very thing he hadn't been ready to do, when he thought he had the courage to face anybody and die for the Lord. But he hadn't learned then this matter that it's better to suffer for doing good if it is the will of God. He hadn't got this matter straight and he was going in his own strength and enthusiasm.

'Be ready to give an answer,' he says.

That was a bit dangerous in those days. And in later Christian times, in the time of Pliny³ and Trajan,⁴ if somebody laid information against you to the magistrate and said you were a Christian then the magistrate had to inquire of you, 'Are you a Christian?' And if you said yes, he had no option but to pronounce the death penalty if you wouldn't recant. You could get along swimmingly if you didn't tell anybody and it was all secret, but once it came out it was a positive danger.

'Be ready to confess the Lord,' says Peter.

'But Peter, it may cost me my life.'

And still to this present day in some countries it costs people their lives to confess the Lord. What would you do if you were a missionary and you knew someone had trusted the Lord, and if he got baptised he stood every chance of being dead in the week after that? Would you ask him to be baptised? Would you tell him to confess the Lord? That would be a big responsibility, wouldn't it?

We need to get this thing clear while we are all quite calm and dispassionate and can look at the things involved. Many a man is faced with a lesser trial, but even in this island in days gone by some people who confessed the Lord were turned out of their homes. And some, if they got baptised, would lose their job. It is a good thing to think it out when our minds are calm and at peace, isn't it?

³ Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus and Bithynia from 111–113 AD.

⁴ Trajan was Roman emperor from 98–117 AD.

‘It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil’ (1 Pet 3:17). ‘Don’t go around inviting persecution, but it could conceivably be God’s will; and if it is, let me say this to comfort you,’ says Peter,

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (v. 18)

Death is not the end

Not only has Christ suffered for us, the just for the unjust, but we are to know that death is not the end.

They foully murdered Christ. ‘Being put to death’ —they *did him to death*. The word that Peter uses is a very strong word—they *did him to death*. They thought that was the end of him, but it wasn’t the end, was it? ‘He was made alive in spirit,’ says Peter, ‘and he went and he preached; and he has now gone to heaven.’ Far from being the end, it was the gateway to something gigantically bigger.

[He] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (v. 22)

Death is not the end, and if it were God’s will that any one of us had to lay down our lives for the sake of the testimony, death would be but a gateway to greater activity and greater service. They thought they had shut his mouth by putting him in a tomb; they hadn’t! He went and he preached, and he’s gone into heaven. From their point of view, it is the worst thing they ever did to him.

Sometimes when we hear of martyrs dying, as those brave men did out in the Ecuadorian jungles,⁵ we say to ourselves, ‘Fancy the Lord letting his work be brought to a standstill.’ Brought to a standstill! Do you really think he has put those dear young men on the retired list, or something? I think not. Christ’s is the kingdom; the gates of death do not prevail against it in any way. You don’t stop the servant by killing him. Like his Lord, it admits him to a far wider field of service. But it takes a lot of believing, doesn’t it?

Suffering sanctifies the believer

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. (4:1–2)

Once more, this matter of God’s will comes up. ‘Since Christ suffered in the flesh, *arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.*’

What memories must have flooded back through Peter’s mind as he wrote it. That terrible night when Christ said, ‘Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one’ (Luke 22:36). Peter got it all mixed up and said, ‘Look, Lord, here are two swords.’ Peter had

⁵ Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint and Ed McCully were killed on 8 January 1956.

gone out into the Garden with a sword—he had armed himself with a sword to prevent suffering.

Now he's learned his lesson, 'Arm yourselves with this same mind to accept suffering, because of its sanctifying effect on the life—he that has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.' There is nothing like suffering in the believer's life to make the realities of life stand out in true proportion, and it challenges us to our very core.

On what principle do I now lead my life? I profess to be saved, but what principle really governs my life? Is it my personal enjoyment? Am I a Christian because it helps me and suits me and makes me feel comfortable? Or does my conversion mean that from now on it is going to be God's will, and that the rest of my time in the body I should no longer live for my own will, but I live my life for the will of God.

There is nothing, I say, like suffering to make a person face the issues, is there? If you are anything like me, when things go easily and well, it is so easy to be a Christian. While we are being moved by our enjoyment and our lovely feelings it is nice, but when God allows suffering for the faith's sake, or for any sake, our motives get challenged. Says Peter, 'Whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.' Not that he is completely sinless, but it raises the big issue: Is it my will, my fancy, my enjoyment; or is my life really governed by God's will?

God grant that all of us, even when times are easy and well, may face this thing; for if we do not face it and some great bereavement or some grave disappointment comes, or some major illness, or suffering in any other respect for Christ's sake, we may find its effect shattering. If we think that salvation means that it is going to be easy, and because we are saved God is going to feather-bed and cotton-wool us, we stand to be very much disappointed. Oh, don't let me preach that being a Christian is grim. 'Let them that suffer according to the will of God,' says Peter, 'commit their lives to a faithful Creator who owns the whole world' (see v. 19). He made your life and values it dearly—'Not a hair of your head will perish,' he promised (Luke 21:18).

But don't let's mistake it; we may in fact be put in the grave with our heads chopped off. When he said, 'Not a hair of your head shall perish,' he meant that no real harm, as God measures harm, can ever come. Oh, how safe to be in his will, because in his will you are indestructible. You shall abide eternally; nothing will really harm you, whatever suffering you may be called upon to pass. And yours shall be the satisfaction of abiding forever; 'Whoever does the will of God abides for ever' (1 John 2:17)

Shall we pray:

Lord we thank thee now for thy holy word. We have been studying things that for many of us go completely beyond our experience. Many of us tonight, oh Lord, may feel that in this thy word we are but theorising. We must thank thee for thy mercies that have sheltered us from grievous persecution, such as our brethren suffer in other places. We thank thee for thy kindness and we pray again that thou wilt remember those that are in bonds for the testimony's sake.

Oh God, we thank thee for thy wisdom in giving us thy word that while things go well and the sun shines, we may be prepared. Give us the wisdom not to wait until

suffering comes. May we one and all consider the matter of what our salvation really means and what we professed in our baptism, so that for each one of us salvation shall really mean the turning of our wills over to thee; wanting to do thy will and live life according to thy desire rather than seeking to please ourselves.

Oh how we praise thee that such a life is radiant with thy blessing, even in the midst of its direst troubles. We do thank thee for the assurance that Christ has come and died, and that he who does the will of God shall abide forever and that in it all thou shalt be faithful. Thou art a faithful Creator.

Bless our study, Lord. Make it profitable now and make it profitable against the time to come, we pray thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Suffering in Relation to our Service for the Lord

Reading: 1 Peter 5:1–7

We have been considering together the subject of suffering and our technique has been to let Peter teach us in his letter what the Lord taught him while he was yet with them. This afternoon I want us to think together on the question of suffering as it affects our service for the Lord.

Now when it comes to service for the Lord, Peter was an extraordinary man. He was an apostle, the very chief of apostles. On him and his confession of our Lord's deity the church was built—being built upon the foundation of the holy apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). He was an evangelist and to him were granted the keys with which he opened the kingdom of God, both to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and to the Gentiles in Cornelius' house. He was an elder, shepherding the people of God as any other elder is called upon to do, a man whose duties for the Lord were many and high and honourable.

This afternoon I want particularly to test the impact that the sufferings of Christ had on Peter's service, so we shall be talking much about elders and apostles rather than about us, the ordinary general run of the Lord's servants (if you will excuse the term). Not forgetting, however, that the impact the sufferings of Christ had upon Peter's service ought to be the same as it has upon our service.

Peter's exhortations and his humility

When Peter writes to the Christians about their service, both to the elders and to the younger, he says, 'Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another' (v. 5). And it is a delightful thing to notice that he first of all shows that humility himself. 'So I exhort the elders that are among you,' says he—as an apostle? No, although he was an apostle. But now he is going to speak to his brothers about their service for the Lord, and rather than styling himself as an apostle, the one who has the keys, he says, 'I exhort you as a *fellow elder*—I take my place alongside of you' (v. 1).

Oh, think how we might have been tempted to write that exhortation. 'I exhort the elders among you, as the chief of all the apostles and the one who holds the keys.' Not Peter. 'I am a fellow elder; I'm doing just the same kind of job as you are doing.' He obviously has already learned to show the humility he urges upon us in our service for the Lord.

And then he adds, 'and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.' The word for *witness* is not the word for eyewitness, as you know. It is rather the witness in the sense of the man who gives testimony to something that he has seen. It's the *martyr* word, the man who stands to give testimony for *what he has seen*.

It is noticeable of course that he doesn't say, 'I am a *partaker* of the sufferings of Christ,' but he says, 'I am a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory'.

Ah, he can't claim to have suffered much. There was one awful moment when he told the Lord about his willingness to suffer for him. 'I'm willing to die for you,' he said. But he hadn't yet got that far and he'd rather think of himself as one who was a witness to the sufferings of Christ and a partaker of the glory that is going to be revealed.

Oh, how humble for the man to think that. He had been present on that last evening with the Lord when the Lord had said how grateful he was for their support.

You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:28–30)

And then what he was going to do for Peter:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.' (vv. 31–34)

Peter hadn't been able to face the little bit of suffering that the Lord called on him to face and he never forgot it. He won't now go parading his office, but will recall gratefully that he is to be a partaker of the glory and be content to describe himself as a witness of the suffering.

The way Peter carried out his work reflected the message he preached

But let us notice that this word 'witness' does mean more than just to look at. It means that he was a *herald*. To him was given the task of proclaiming the sufferings of Christ, and he puts it high on the list of the things that influence him as he comes to his work of shepherding the Lord's people. You see, the way he will go about his work must match the message that he has to preach.

He's not a subsidiary to Moses, teaching the law. My, how would you act if you were a sort of lieutenant of Moses preaching the law? Well, you can imagine coming down from the mountain with a rod and the tablets and laying down stringent commands.

'That's not my job,' Peter says. 'The message I'm bringing is the sufferings of Christ: how Christ suffered and died for people and therefore the way I go about my ministry will be marked by the message I preach.'

It is possible to preach the message of the sufferings of Christ but to go about one's service for the Lord in a spirit that is alien to those sufferings. When we read what Peter had to say about the task it becomes very clear that his whole attitude to his work as an elder has been deeply marked by what he saw and what he has to tell about the sufferings of Christ.

Let's look at the details.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 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. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet 5:1-4)

Not under compulsion, but willingly—Peter could honestly say he fulfilled that. When the Lord had called him to the task he had left all and gone after Christ. *Not for shameful gain*; there had been one apostle who had been led astray just there. Judas had used the powers that Christ entrusted to him to make money. ‘Don’t you do like that,’ says Peter.

But those two things perhaps are comparatively easy, compared with the next pair of contrasts: *Not domineering over those in your charge—but being examples to the flock*. Presently I will come to the matter of translation, ‘those in your charge’, rather than ‘God’s heritage’ (KJV), but for the moment let’s concentrate on this. ‘Not domineering over those in your charge—but being examples to the flock,’ and immediately of course our minds go back to the occasion when the Lord himself taught Peter and the rest of the disciples this lesson, warning them not to lord it over the flock.

What it means to be really great

I wonder if you could read with me the occasion.

And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.’ (Luke 22:23-27)

Here it is. The very same word is used. ‘Neither as lording it over God’s heritage, or the heritage given to you. Don’t do as the Gentiles do, who lord it over their subjects.’

The memory of this night would never be erased from Peter’s mind. I dare say every time the man sat down at the Breaking of Bread he recalled the scene bitterly. They had just celebrated the Passover and our Lord had just instituted the Lord’s Supper, giving them the emblem of his body and the emblem of his blood—that eloquent symbol of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. Here is the Lord telling these men that he is about to give himself for them and for all who afterwards should believe—giving himself, body and blood, till both were separate and he had nothing more to give—and there arose in very sight of those emblems *an ambitious contention* as to who should be the greatest.

They couldn’t have been concentrating much on the symbols, could they? The symbols were telling them about someone who humbled himself and became obedient to death; someone who loved his fellow men so much that he was prepared to serve them in this

fashion and give himself and all he had. And meanwhile the apostles were engaging their thoughts with 'an ambitious contention', for that is what the word means, as to who was going to be counted the greatest. Our Lord had to talk to them kindly, and how graciously he did it, for when our Lord taught these men to be shepherds he acted as the perfect shepherd himself.

How is this business of shepherding done? Not by lording it over people, but making oneself an example. You do the job as it ought to be done; let the others see how it's done and learn from you. That's the secret of leading people. And so, when our Lord began to teach these apostles to be shepherds, it wasn't merely by giving them long lists of rules, but predominantly by doing himself the task in the way it ought to be done.

Here were the apostles, with the seeds of that ambitious spirit in their hearts to lord it over their brethren, grasping position and job and office as a means to exalt themselves. And the Lord says, 'No, don't do it like that, that's how the Gentiles do it. Look around for yourselves and see. There's Herod on his throne. Is he there for the benefit of his subjects? Not really. He's there for the gratifying feeling that it is to have power in one's hands, to be able to control other people's lives and tell them what to do, and so to control things that it serves one's own gratification. That's not your task, gentlemen.'

What is it, then?

'To do like me. Look what I've been doing while you've been quarrelling. Don't you see the point of these emblems? I'm preparing to give myself, and I'm appointing you men to go out and be witnesses of my sufferings. This is the message you will take, of someone not wanting to lord it over people's lives, but a saviour who has come down to give himself for them.

'Tell me,' he says, 'which is the greater: the man that sits at table or the man that serves? Well, obviously the man that sits at table—he's the big man, isn't he? And the man that serves—he's the under-man. And will you notice what place I've taken,' says the Lord to the twelve, 'I am among you as the man that waits on table.'

What extraordinary words. The one who before this had been in heaven and all the angels waited on him hand and foot, he came down to serve the table at which the apostles sat.

If you went home tonight and sat in your lounge and could push a little button and presently in came a waiter and waited on you hand and foot, you would be important for a moment, wouldn't you? I say it reverently, suppose you pushed the button and Christ himself came in and spread the table, how would you feel? And my dear brothers and sisters, I suppose most, if not all, of you sat this morning around a table, and you know who spread it, don't you? And you know what it cost him to spread it so that he might feed you.

'One of these days,' said Christ to his apostles, 'you are going to sit on a throne, and real authority will be committed to you. Serving me is not a drudgery.'

Don't get me wrong, we are not being sentimental and saying that to be a shepherd in a Christian church means you so pander to people that they can all do what they like. There never was anybody with greater authority than Christ. He stood before Caiaphas and Annas and Pilate and all their hosts and didn't flinch while he told them to their faces, 'Woe to you, hypocrites' (see Matthew 23).

The right motivation for serving others

But, you see, the secret of wielding true authority is the attitude to the person you're trying to serve. Why are you doing it? Is it to get authority over their lives, or is it that you really love them? You're not lording it over them. On that very same evening, so John tells us, while they were sitting around the table, the Lord got up and took off his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist and got down and washed their feet to make them feel more comfortable (John 13). He was again grasping the opportunity to serve that they were so slow to take.

'Now this is what it means to be really great,' he says.

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43–44)

That is what being a shepherd is; that is what preaching the gospel is; that is what ministering the word of God is. The people that sit in the seats, they are the big people; the men that stand to preach, they are just the servants.

I say again, Christ wasn't being sentimental. When he got down to serve those men and to wash their feet it was because he genuinely loved them and valued them. We need to listen to that.

Not practising what you preach

You will know that when our Lord was here on earth he came into grave conflict with the religious leaders of his day and in that very conflict we see these principles that Peter is talking about here emphasised very clearly. The criticisms that the Lord levelled against the Pharisees and scribes was because they taught the scriptures. Had you listened to those Pharisees and scribes, you'd have been struck by their strictness in laying down the law. They would have told you not merely that you mustn't break the Sabbath, but they would have put a hedge around it so that you didn't go within miles of breaking the Sabbath—there were all sorts of rules and regulations that weren't in Scripture by a long, long way.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practise and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practise. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Matt 23:1–4)

They made life an intolerable, dreary and burdensome thing. What was wrong in it all? We can admire their zeal for God, if indeed it was zeal for God, but the great flaw in the ministry of those men was that they didn't love the people on whose backs they were binding the burdens. They wouldn't have lifted them with one of their fingers.

There was a man in the synagogue one day and his hand was withered. What did that matter to them that the man's hand was withered, so long as their law was kept? They were the exponents of the law and they had authority and could tell people what to do. They didn't care about the man's suffering; they'd have left him there all that Sabbath, so heartless

and cruel they were in their indifference to people's feelings and sufferings. They didn't really love the people, but they enjoyed laying down the law.

Following Christ's example

'Oh, don't you be like them,' says Christ. 'If you will be a shepherd, the first thing you must get into your heart is a sense of the value of the people that you are ministering to. See how I value you and the rest. I will give my body for you, I will give my blood for you; I'll get down and wash your feet. If I talk strongly at times it is because I really love you and I want to save you from harm.'

As we look on him, the chief shepherd, we see the very heart of God shining. It's not God tying burdens on people's backs. His commands are not grievous, and they're not grievous because every one of them is inspired by his value of you and his love for you.

We are to be examples

'But then,' says Peter, 'not only are we not to lord it over the other folk, but the positive side is therefore in our service we are to make ourselves examples' (1 Pet 5:3).

This is a matter that not only concerns elders, but all that take a part in God's work, so that most of us here this afternoon can listen in. I can stand aside and let the word of God speak directly to the elders, and to me as I teach you, and to you too as a Sunday school teacher maybe, or in the home where you exert influence for God. Positively here, Peter exhorts us to make ourselves an example.

As he writes his exhortation, again how vividly certain things must have crossed his mind from his experience of the Lord when he was here on earth.

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter answered him, 'Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' Peter said to him, 'Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!' And all the disciples said the same . . . Then all the disciples left him and fled . . . And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. (Matt 26:30-35, 56, 58)

The example of the true shepherd

We're going to watch how, by observing Christ, Peter learned what it is to be a shepherd; Christ making himself an example. We've been doing it already, so we'll continue.

These are familiar words, but notice here the imagery of shepherd and sheep. They left the Upper Room and are now on the Mount of Olives. The Lord says, 'You will all fall away because of me this night [wandering sheep]. For it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you [like a

shepherd] to Galilee.' That is what shepherds in the east always do, isn't it? 'I will go before you and I will bring you back, I will assemble you again.' He's talking as the chief shepherd.

'But tonight,' he says, 'you'll be scattered. You'll be like wandering sheep.'

'Not I,' says Peter. 'I'll never be led astray. I'll stick with you through thick and thin.'

But a very few verses later, we read, 'Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled' (v. 56 KJV).

To grasp what is now going to happen, you have to imagine these men as sheep, and they have gone astray. The Lord has frightened them and they have run off, and the shepherd is taken down into the judgment hall. What will the shepherd do now? He's promised to restore and go before them and bring them together again, but for the moment they're scattered. What will he do?

Peter went in 'to see the end.' He sat there, in part with a guilty conscience. He'd run off from the Lord, but not so far as some. The others had been a bit more cowardly still, they'd got right away. He followed at any rate; even if it was at a distance, he was more brave than most. He wanted to see the end. I wonder what went through his mind. Was he sitting there puzzling to himself, 'I wonder what he'll do now? Will he call down legions of angels? Will he strike Annas dead? Will he expose the horror of this court and its wickedness? Will he make a whip of cords like he did in the temple? What will he do? Will he deliver himself? Will he stand up for himself?'

Peter stood to see the end, and oh, what an end it was. You'll read it in the Gospels, but when you come to the Epistles it's only in Peter that you will read anything about this bit, for Peter was the apostle that watched it happen. As they spat in his face and struck our Lord, Peter sat outside in the courtyard with a guilty conscience, as one that had run off, and watched how far the shepherd would go for a man who had gone astray. It bit into Peter's heart. It's one thing to know it in theory, but to sit there with a guilty conscience, as a sheep that has already started on the path of going astray, and watch how far the shepherd will go for you—that was a hard lesson to have to sit and face.

Peter records it in his second chapter, 'When he was reviled, he did not revile in return' (v. 23). Why didn't he stand up for himself? The high priest asked him about his doctrine and about his disciples and Peter was cowering in the corner, scared stiff in case the Lord should blurt out that Peter was one of the disciples—'There he is, look!' But in magnificent silence, the Lord said nothing about that. He'll let Peter speak about that himself; or, if he doesn't want to speak, well, let him keep quiet, he won't embarrass the man. Why doesn't he stick up for himself? Presently one of the officers smites him across the mouth; but there is no reviling, no threatening.

Peter is seeing the end; how far the shepherd will go to save his sheep. Oh, no wonder he says to his fellow elders, 'Shepherd the flock of God that is among you' (5:2). 'Look, my fellow elders, very frequently you'll have to seek out a sheep that has gone astray. Remember, as elders, you bear witness to the sufferings of Christ; you are the men that bear witness to how far Christ will go for a sheep that has gone astray.'

'The end'—Peter hadn't seen the end yet, had he? The silent Christ; if he'd spoken he could have exposed the lot and Peter with them, and gone free himself. But he kept quiet and bore the stripe so that he might stand in the place of the sheep, and face the wolf and the

lion until they tore him to shreds. It was not even for good sheep that were all inside the fold, but for a lot of sheep that were already running off.

Facing up to ‘the end’

Ah, but we haven’t got to the end yet. Peter went in to see *the end of Christ*, but he saw two ends. He saw the end of Christ indeed, but he saw *the end of Peter*. The bombshell hadn’t burst yet. He’d run off, but he was better than the rest—he was sitting outside the judgment hall while the others had gone home. He hadn’t been able to believe it when the Lord had told him, ‘Peter, you’ll deny me.’ But now, in a few moments, the bombshell burst, and Peter saw the end of Peter—what he was really capable of doing if he got away from the Lord.

There came two servant girls and some bystanders and he swore with oaths and curses that he didn’t know the Lord. And immediately the cock crowed (Matt 26:69–75). Never had a bird made a sound like that one did for Peter. You say, ‘What did it mean?’ Peter had just been through the absolute earthquake of finding out the wickedness of his own heart, and now he sees that it is just what the Lord said to start with; he knew it all from the beginning. The Lord wasn’t surprised. It wasn’t that the Lord went into the judgment hall and allowed himself to be taken but then found himself in a situation where he could no longer escape. It wasn’t that he had gone along with it in the idea that Peter was a good man at heart, and only then discovered his disloyalty. Oh, it wasn’t that. The cock crowed, and Peter remembered the words of the Lord Jesus. The Lord had been right, he had known him through and through from the start. What an amazing thing—when the soldiers had been hitting him five minutes before, and afterwards when they scourged his back—the Lord had already seen how the end would be for Peter.

The standard for a shepherd is high

Oh, what an example of shepherdhood. This isn’t sentiment, you know; it is stern reality. This is what being a shepherd means. We get awfully surprised with one another, don’t we? ‘We never would have expected that he would have done that,’ we say. ‘Oh, well. Oh, well, if I’d known he was such a man.’

The Lord is never surprised. Long before he went to the cross for you and me and started to be our shepherd, he had seen the end. He’s not surprised; and if we are, when we discover ourselves, the amazing thing is that, knowing it all, he went and suffered.

The standard the Lord set for Peter and the standard that Peter sets for us in our work is impossibly high. ‘How shall we do it,’ you say, ‘if this is what being a shepherd means?’ It shapes our lives and it shapes our determination to go on serving and praying.

Taking them back to the start

Ah, but the Lord is not finished. ‘But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee’ (Matt 26:32). There are lessons that Peter still had to be taught on this matter of shepherdhood. (I must omit the most of them.) We read how the Lord after his resurrection revealed himself to them the third time at the Sea of Galilee when they went fishing (John 21).

He had important lessons to teach them. As they dragged in the net full of fish, it took Peter's mind back to the first time that the Lord had called him to his service:

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' (Matt 4:18-19)

But this time he was pointing out to Peter that he would be with him, even in those hours when he didn't see the Lord, when his work seemed fruitless and they were getting nowhere. The risen Lord would always be standing on the shore to direct, not leaving the younger shepherds alone in their task, but always willing to shepherd them as they seek to shepherd us.

Peter's response to the Lord

I must leave those lessons to come to those two that stand at the end of John's Gospel. After they had eaten, Peter was now to be reappointed. First of all he had been a fisher of men, now he is going to be appointed shepherd of the sheep. This story has often been told; the Lord searched that man's heart.

'Peter, do you love me?'

'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.'

When he asked him for the third time, Peter said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you' (John 21:17).

'Didn't you know before? I didn't know my own heart but you knew, Lord. You told me that I would deny you. I didn't think it was possible, but you knew. You know everything, and you know, Lord, that I love you.'

And this was no boast, for where would Peter have been without the Lord? This was not the boast of an eminently successful and spiritual man; it was the humble tribute of a sheep that would have perished forever apart from Christ's shepherdhood.

'I love you Lord,' he said. 'I should have been down the drain without you.'

'Then, Peter, you're just the man to feed my sheep. I don't want men who feel themselves eminently superior, I want men who have had personal experience of me as their shepherd, and are prepared to mediate that to their brothers and sisters when they go astray. That's what I want.'

That's how Peter was able to say, 'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.'

What is our response?

This is something perhaps that is better without a multiplicity of words. Rather, in the quiet of our hearts, to say to the Lord, 'In my service for you, Lord, what is my motive? Do I love using the big stick and the rod and fencing people in with walls, or have I learned the value that you place on an individual sheep because you went to such an end for me, the worst of the sheep? Lord, you know that I do love you, for I should have been lost without you, my testimony would have been ruined and wouldn't have lasted five minutes. And because I've

learned how valuable it is to have a shepherd that loves like that, and because I love him, I would count it a great privilege to be allowed in my turn to look after his sheep in the same fashion.'

Finishing well

Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, 'Follow me.' (John 21:17-19)

Even in the most intimate and exalted moments the Lord was ever a realist, not lording it over the flock. 'Feed my lambs and tend my sheep. But before you go, Peter, there are certain limits to your work.'

He wasn't saying that the day would come when he would have to lay it down. First, the Lord reassured Peter, didn't he? 'When you were young, you used to dress yourself and went wherever you wanted' — 'you saw there was a job to be done and you got up and did it. Wasn't that a lovely thing to be able to do?'

Then he told him, 'When you are old, you'll lose that power. Others will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' He was still the shepherd, putting signposts along the journey so that the sheep wouldn't get worried and seem to have lost its way in the difficulties of old age.

'Peter,' he says, 'I want you to know that I've a service for you to do now when you are young, and I've a service for you when you are old and can no longer do what you formerly did.' In Peter's case it would be a question of persecution and imprisonment. His service would come to an abrupt end, not the kind of thing he'd choose. 'But Peter,' he says, 'I want you to know that you'll glorify me in that too.'

I should like to comfort my older Christian brothers and sisters by just making an aside remark. Some of you may be growing older. Once you loved to be active in the Lord's work; you sought out the sheep, you did your visitation, you helped in numberless ways. When you saw a job to be done, you did it. You are growing older now, and you don't have the strength. You can't concentrate as you used to and read your Bibles, and you can't get out to as many meetings as you would like and it seems a frustration. You begin to think, 'What use am I to the Lord?'

What use are you to the Lord! Why, when you have done your little bit of shepherding, you are still his sheep. You are always valuable and your value will not decrease. He values you, not because of the work you did, but because of who you are. You are his sheep right to the very end, even all the way home to glory.

Can you be a shepherd? You can glorify God by showing some of our youngsters the glory of a life that not only started well but ended well. Oh, it's easy when you have learned the theory to get up and speak, isn't it? It's quite another thing to have done fifty years on the road and then to go home triumphantly, glorifying God. That's the biggest test of all shepherds, isn't it, the way they end up?

'But, Peter,' he said, 'I want you to remember there are limits to your work even as a shepherd.'

'Peter turned round and saw [John] following them, and he said, "Lord, what about this man?"'

Said the Lord, 'What is that to you?'

That was blunt, wasn't it?

'That's nothing to do with you, Peter, what John does. That's my responsibility. "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"' (v. 22).

Shepherding, not controlling

He wanted Peter to shepherd the sheep but he didn't want Peter controlling the other servants, and the church would have done well to have learned the lesson. The human heart is a curious thing. We'd rather control the servant than look after the sheep, wouldn't we? What great organisations the church has built for controlling servants!

Says the Lord, 'Please will you leave that thing to me, Peter!'

Peter did as he was told. You'll never read once in all the Acts of the Apostles that Peter attempted to tell another servant what to do. Some had a go at telling Peter, didn't they? When he preached the gospel to the Gentiles, they hauled him up and said, 'Give an account of this' (Acts 11). But you'll never find Peter interfering, not even on that great occasion when Paul and Barnabas fell out and couldn't agree on methods in the Lord's work. You don't read that Peter stepped in and said, 'Look here, Barnabas, this won't do.' He hadn't authority to do anything; that was the Lord's business and servants must be left free to be immediately responsible to their Lord.

That's church principles: we've got enough to do without going outside our tasks. Shepherds must know what their tasks are and what their tasks are not. In the early church there was a thorny problem about whether you should eat meat offered to idols or not. Some said you should, some said you might and there is no harm in it, and some said, no, you shouldn't. There was the matter of whether you observe days and months and sacred seasons. Some said you should and some said you needn't.

Says the great Apostle Paul as he discusses the matter in the letter to the Romans, 'Now look here, brethren, when it comes to these matters of conscience, will you please leave your brother alone. Who gave you permission to judge somebody else's servant?'

Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Rom 14:4)

Let us remember, please, the sufferings of Christ. What did Christ die for? That he might forgive our sins, yes, but for another reason—he died that he might be Lord, not you.

'To his own master he stands or falls.' Here is one man who thinks it's wicked to eat meat. That's between him and the Lord; don't you interfere. Another man says, 'That's nonsense, it's all right to eat meat.' And that's none of your business either!

The art of the shepherd, you see, is not to get between the sheep and the Lord. It is to bring the sheep to the Lord. It is far more important in daily life that each believer makes his

own decision before the Lord. The valuable thing is in trying to please the Lord, and if the person is honestly trying to please the Lord you can leave it there. The Lord will guide. Let us learn our limitations lest, with very good desire, we get between the sheep and the Lord, and the sheep merely do things because we say so, instead of their personal decision as free men and women before the Lord.

It will take tremendous wisdom and grace for elders in particular to know where to draw the line, won't it? It's easy for me to stand and preach the theory. But then, the theory is important too. These were the lessons that the Lord taught Peter and Peter says, 'As the Lord made himself an example to me, God give you grace to make yourselves examples to the flock.'

What is the Christian Church and What does it Mean to be a Member?

Readings: John 1:35–42; Acts 4:5–12; 1 Peter 1:22–2:8

I would like to speak to you this evening on the topic of the Christian church; what it is, and what it means to be a member of the church of Christ. It goes almost without saying, surely, that on this topic we cannot possibly appeal to a higher human authority than the Apostle Peter. After all, it was the Apostle Peter to whom our Lord made that great promise and statement:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt 16:18)

You will remember the occasion of that statement. The Lord had just asked his disciples what opinions people had about who he was, and they had given various ideas. Turning to Peter, our Lord said, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter replied with that great answer, taught to him by God himself, '*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*' (v. 16).

Peter was the man to whom God revealed first, in all its fullness, that Jesus was the Son of God. Our Lord's reply to that confession was, 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (v. 18). 'On this rock—your confession of my name; you the first man to confess me thus—I will begin to build my church.' And in accordance with that, we read that the Christian church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). It is a company of men and women built on this foundation laid by Peter, 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

Was it not Peter to whom Christ gave the keys of his kingdom (Matt 16:19)? Appointing that Peter should be the first to open the door of the gospel to the Jew, which he did on the day of Pentecost; and similarly to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles, which he did in the house of Cornelius. Was it not also to Peter that he said, 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'? And was it not Peter who, in pursuance of those powers, stood out boldly on the day of Pentecost, in Cornelius' house and elsewhere, using this blessed ministry from God himself to free men and women from the thralldom and bondage of sin?

What a wonderful message he brought. He brought it even to the nation that had murdered Christ, that if they would repent and believe they might be free from their sin. God had raised Jesus from the dead to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins. And did he not tell the Gentiles similarly, 'To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name' (Acts 10:43)?

In consequence, the church of Christ is a company of men and women built upon the foundation that Jesus is the Son of God; a company of men and women that have been set free from the bondage and the guilt of their sin.

The church as a building

We cannot help noticing in his sermons and writings that Peter continually recurs to this figure of a building. We noticed him preaching it before the Sanhedrin, and the same thing in his letter to fellow Christians in Ephesus. He likens the church to living stones built around the chief cornerstone, which is Christ himself. To be secure, any building, both in the ancient world and in the modern, must be built upon a firm foundation.

Any building in the ancient world that would have an ordered shape and stand upright on its *foundation* and not collapse must be firmly built around what they call the *chief cornerstone*. As with buildings, so with men and women. The church is a company of men and women who have found the only solid foundation upon which life can successfully be built. The order and direction of their lives has now been changed. They have found the only true chief cornerstone and learned to build their lives around him.

Personal foundations and cornerstones

I wonder could I pause and challenge each of our hearts: upon what foundation do you build your life? Around what cornerstone is your life organised? Men and women have often different cornerstones, but everyone builds round some kind of a cornerstone. With one man, it is business, maybe. His whole life is organised around that business; it stands central to his life. This is the thing that gives his life meaning and coherence. It all radiates from and is gathered round this great cornerstone, his business. Another man's cornerstone maybe is his family. The wife and family are central, everything radiates from them and comes back to them. This is the thing he lives for; this is what gives his life its meaning. With another woman, perhaps, it's her home. This is the chief cornerstone in life, the thing that gives it meaning, around which it is lived.

All those things may in themselves be good things, but when we ask what is the Christian church, the answer is clear: it is a company of people who have found out that all those things that are good, and many more—while they may be excellent things in themselves—are disastrously unsatisfactory as a cornerstone around which to build one's life.

We are more than creatures of time. We belong to eternity, and it is a perilously dangerous thing to pin our lives around any other cornerstone than one which is eternal. Presently, sir, your business will be gone and you must go on. If your business has been your cornerstone, when that cornerstone is removed what will happen to your life? If the cornerstone in your life has been your family and one day that family should be gone and the cornerstone removed, if you have no other your life will collapse, will it not?

How very carefully we ought to examine this matter as we sit in God's presence this evening. On what is my life built? Around what is my life centred?

The rulers of the nation rejected Christ

This is perhaps a more difficult question than you might think. You might think it would be an easy and attractive thing, as indeed in some sense it is, to be a Christian and a member of the Christian church, and everybody would willingly flock to the Saviour, glad and proud to be a Christian. But it is not so. We read how Peter stood up in the Sanhedrin long ago in Jerusalem, and he had to charge the leaders of that nation.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘you are the builders of this nation.’

These men held the political power. They guided the nation, laid down policies, controlled people’s lives and gave them guidance.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘you, the rulers, have been guilty of rejecting the stone that God has chosen to be his chief cornerstone—Jesus Christ is the stone that was set apart for you, the builders, but you wouldn’t have him’ (see Acts 4:11).

Why do you think those ancient men so adamantly refused to accept our Lord as their chief cornerstone? I think we can see why. Our Lord warned the men and women of his day that the chief and important thing in life is *not so much how well we build, but where we build*.

Building in the right place and on the right foundation

That is true in ordinary life. Here is a man and he spends his very last penny in building a glorious house, perfect in its joints, beautiful in all its appointments; he has built it well. Ah, but tragically he has built it in the wrong place; he has built it on sand. When the storm comes, the fact that the house is built well will avail him nothing. The house will collapse, for the fundamentally important thing is not how well you build, but where you build.

Here is another man. He has done his best, but the house isn’t built so well, maybe, yet when the storm arrives on his house, his house stands. Why? Because it was built in the right place and on the right foundation.

I pause to underline it in our thinking. It is so easy to get this thing confused. We come to the Bible and we read the Gospels exhorting us to be good, and our consciences acknowledge the truth of it—God wants us to be good. We think in our heart of hearts that to be a Christian must surely mean that I try to be a good person and I behave well, and that we’ve got the right idea to start with. But it is so easy to make a mistake here, and think that Christianity is merely to do with the way we build our ‘houses’, that is, the house of our life, and forget that there is something more fundamental and far more important: *the house should be built on the right foundation* (see Matt 7:24–27).

In the ancient world the chief cornerstone was part of the foundation. It was the most important part. And therefore Peter uses this illustration, ‘Gentlemen, you have rejected the chief cornerstone.’

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:11–12)

Why did they take such objection to it? For this reason: Peter repeated what our Lord had said, that if life is going to be built so that it lasts eternally this is the foundation: ‘There

is no other name under heaven given among men by which—and let us notice these next words—*we must be saved.*'

It is all too possible to endeavour honestly to build a good life, build it decently, and overlook the chief cornerstone Jesus Christ, who came as Saviour. Here is the *sine qua non*—the essential condition—here is the foundation: you must be saved, for however else you try and build your building it will collapse in the last day.

It is not the building of that 'Sadducee life' or that 'Pharisee life', so full of good works. Is it enough to have good works? Come now, has it been built on the right foundation? Is it grouped around the Lord Jesus? Have the Sadducees and Pharisees listened to his word that they need to be saved? Ah, no. Their pride just hasn't yet let them bow to this. They are desperately trying to build well, but they will not build around this cornerstone. In fact, they don't like this insistence on Christ's part and on Peter's part that they must be saved. They go on building, but they have rejected the chief cornerstone.

And where other men have made this grave mistake, we do well to stop short in our tracks and peer into our own hearts for a while. Let's take it for granted that all of us here have done our honest best to please God and build our lives well. But that is not quite the point. Let's go down deeper and let me probe a moment. Is that life of yours, and mine, built on the foundation? Have I come to Christ as the chief cornerstone? Have I let him put the cornerstone in its solid position at the very basis of my life? Have I been saved?

We need to face it earnestly. My dear friends, this is not a gloomy subject, it is a wonderful thing. It is possible for a human life to be saved—not only saved in this life so that this life is a success, but, more importantly, saved eternally. It is possible for your life to go on to eternity and last through all its building to God's praise. It is possible for a human life now, even in this shaky and shakeable world, to feel beneath its feet the solid foundation that shall never give way. As you build even in this life it is possible for you to face the storms that may rock you, but, because you are built around the right cornerstone, to know that your house will never collapse. This is the glorious old message of the gospel that Christian people have sung for ages, this great 'rock of ages' that God has offered us on which we may build and be saved for this life and eternally.

Who are the members of the church?

So then, the true Christian church is a group of men and women that have come to the Saviour and allowed him to tell them that they need to be saved, and can be saved. And they have let Christ save them. They are being built up around him into a spiritual house—that is how Peter described it.

As you come to him [Jesus Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.
(1 Pet 2:4-5)

But I ask you to notice that this coming to Christ is a not a mere formal thing. What does Peter say? 'Christ is a *living stone* and the members of his church, they too are *living stones.*' The Christian church is a company of people that are joined by ties of life to the living

Saviour. It is not necessary for me to tell you that a church in the Bible sense is not a building made of ordinary stones, nor is it just a collection of people who have agreed together and signed a statement of creed. There is something far more important than that; it is a question of a living union between a person and Christ.

How does a stone become a living stone? Or, to put it in reality, how does a human life come to the Saviour and get joined in this living, vital way to him? This is the very heart of the gospel. It is a story that Peter was never tired of telling. This was his experience of Christ from the very start; this is how he got saved. This is what salvation means.

He says, "This is how I first found the Lord. Let me tell you what he did for me. I heard the message that John the Baptist had said, that Jesus is the Lamb of God come to die for our sins, and I went after Christ for I had sins that needed to be cleansed. When I came to Christ, he said, "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone" (John 1:42 KJV).

The significance of names and of individuals

Now to understand fully what happened just then, we must think for a moment of the way the ancient world regarded names. To us it may sound a superficial thing, but to the ancients it was a thing of deep significance for a person to have his name changed.

Names are wonderful things, aren't they? They can be common names like Jack and Bill, or they can be uncommon names like Maximilian and Persephone. It doesn't matter what kind they are, but names are wonderful things. They stand for people, don't they? When they gave a child a name in the ancient world they tried their best to sum up that child's character. The name stood for what the child was.

And when the Bible wants to encourage us to think about God's great and wonderful knowledge and his ability to take account of the individual, it says that God is so great that he can tell the numbers of the stars, *and he calls them all by name*. When we go out on a starlit night and see the heavens full of stars, most of us find it very difficult to distinguish one from another, let alone remember all their names; and all we can see are about three thousand stars, even on the brightest night. The astronomers tell us that in this universe of ours, there are millions upon millions upon millions and millions that we can see when we turn our telescopes on the night sky. And beyond what we can see, there must be countless millions upon millions more. It is said of God that he calls them all by name, he knows them every one and he knows how each one differs from another.

And it is also said of God that he knows his sheep and he calls them by name. Oh, what a wonderful God he is. He knows people not merely in bulk, he knows them individually and knows exactly what they are in themselves. You Mary, and you George, and all that the names Mary and George stand for in a living human personality—a life and a character, the Bible tells us that God knows each one through and through and he knows them by name.

His people take great comfort in that, if you will allow me to digress a moment. Talking to his people in ancient times, says God, 'Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands' (Isa 49:16). It was a lovely metaphor. Out in the East, when a mother sees a son leave home and perhaps he goes away to the wars, the mother will go down to the market place and find a skilled writer who can write—she can't write herself. And she'll pay the writer to

take his instruments and tattoo the name of her boy on the palm of her hand. What for? So that every hour of the day, as she goes about her work, leads the plough, gets the meal ready and sweeps the house, the name of her son is constantly in her sight. The Bible tells me that God knows his people like that, each one, individually. He knows us tonight.

The point is this. Just as he knew Simon through and through and gave him a new name, so he longs to come to us and change our names. The fact is that we are not good enough as we are, we need to be changed.

He'll do the same for you, my friend. He says, 'I know you Mary, I know you George. I've known you from the very moment you were conceived, and I know all that has gone on to make you. I tell you Mary, and I tell you George, your name needs to be changed. *You* need to be changed; you need to be saved. You need to be born again and given a new name.'

How we become living stones in Christ's church

Says Peter, 'I came to Christ as Simon; he changed me into a living stone and called me Peter. Now it is open to you to come.' I know Peter was a great apostle, but the experience that Peter had is an experience that we may have. It is an experience that we must have if we would become living stones in Christ's church—'to whom you are also coming, you are built up as living stones' (1 Pet 2:4–5).

And to make the matter very explicit, Peter reminded them of what happened when they came to Christ: 'You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God' (1:23). That is how we become living stones.

Is it true for me personally?

And I pause here. Obviously we must meet the Saviour's challenge. You were named Martha, were you, and you, sir, were named Tom? Have you ever come to Christ for him to change your name? In other words, have you come to Christ and received from him this absolutely new thing? Have you been born again—have you let the Saviour give you this eternal life of which he speaks?

Have you?

The early Christians went and preached to unsaved people out of pagan lands. These people worshipped idols and many of them were called after the names of their idols. When they got saved and God's word brought regeneration in their hearts and they confessed their faith in Christ, the early Christian preachers would give them a new name. They would call it their *Christian name*. They got it as a symbol, now that they have this brighter living experience. They have been born again, they have really become true Christians. They were now living stones and they called them by new names—they got a Christian name.

We have lost sight of that. We still get Christian names, don't we? Our parents give us Christian names when we are little babies. But don't let it obscure the issue, will you? If you are resting on getting your Christian name through infant baptism, Sir, Madam, there still remains the necessity for the reality to take place. *You must be born again*. The mere giving of a Christian name means nothing.

Are we living stones? Are we vitally joined to Christ, the living stone, by possessing this eternal life that he gives? Have we been born again? This is inconceivably important.

The world is passing

Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains for ever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1:23–25)

The apostle helps us to see the significance of this. Says he, 'You know, the world is passing; the grass withers and the flowers fall.' We see it with our own eyes. This world as God made it was a beautiful place and still retains much of its original beauty. But the green grass and the beautiful flowers that blossom in springtime eventually fade, they wither and they die. They tell us the yearly lesson that the world in which we live is only temporary, it will soon be gone. God wants us to enjoy the homes we have built, but, listen, they are passing.

The world is passing and eternity comes after, and what a wonderful world it will be compared with this world. Glorious as this world may be, it is only temporary and a passing thing. Eternity is forever. But it is in this life that the foundation is laid; it is in this life that the chief cornerstone is added and the building is done that we shall inherit for eternity.

I wonder how many of us shall go into eternity, our lives built round a cornerstone that shall never give way. Is yours? I trust you will excuse my fervour and my personal directness, for these things are all important. The world is passing. That very body of yours is beginning to show signs of wear and tear; some of your friends and our mothers and fathers and relatives are already gone. The world is passing. The scientists tell us that one day this world will go. The world and its glory is passing away.

The word of the Lord shall endure

'And this word is the good news that was preached to you' (v. 25). Oh, that God would move all our hearts right now and have us look again at the things around which our lives are built. Have we come to the Saviour? Have we bowed to his word that says we must be saved: 'You must be born again' (John 3:7)?

He says, 'You must come and let me regenerate you and give you this new life. You must let me make you a living stone. If you would live eternally, you must be joined to me, the great, living chief cornerstone.'

Have we let him do this miracle of his grace and generate us by the word of the Lord that lives and abides for ever? Have you, madam? Have you, sir?

I trust my words do not offend any. Those who know the Saviour will be glad as they feel that solid rock under their feet and draw closer to the living cornerstone. It could be that some do not know him and resent my preaching. Oh, sir, if you do; oh, madam, if you do, will you not give heed to God's word, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him *will not be put to shame*' (1 Pet 2:6; Isa 28:16). *You will never be let down.*

But if you reject that cornerstone, the very stone will turn and become a stumbling block. 'They stumble because they disobey the word' (1 Pet 2:8). Ah, how many men have tripped over Christ into a godless hell and have been shattered eternally. We either build on him or we are broken by him. 'Blessed is the one who is not offended by me,' said the Saviour himself (Matt 11:6). That is not the end either, 'And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him' (21:44).

These are the alternatives. To be built into the living cornerstone and to enjoy God forever. Or to stumble over him and, when the Lord comes, to be broken to pieces and crushed.

We are living in a world that's passing. If we've not done it so far, God give us the grace to come as Peter came, to get our names changed, to receive from him the gift of eternal life, to be born again, to enter God's family and become a living member of Christ's church.

Shall we pray:

We now ask grace that thy Holy Spirit will quieten our hearts and give us to understand and see the significance of what has been read from thy holy word. From it all, we pray this, Lord, that thou will fasten in our minds this basic thing: that humankind needs to be saved and can be saved; needs to be born again and can be born again; has the opportunity to be built again on this solid foundation and to be joined livingly and eternally to Christ. Oh Lord, impress it on our minds.

We who know him give thanks. We pray that those who are not built on him may come to him to be changed into living stones and made members of his church. Grant that none here shall stumble over him into hell and none shall ever be broken under the stone of God's judgment and crushed to powder.

Rather, Lord, that our hearts may be filled with praise, thy temple added to and yet more hearts built up as a priesthood to give thanks to thee. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.