

1 Peter 4:1-11

Believers Encouraged To Work Out Their Salvation

SUMMARY OF THE CONTENTS

Earlier the apostle had admonished his fellow-believers to walk in the fear of God (1:14-17, 22; 2:1,11-12; 3:8-12). Peter uses the complete sacrifice of Christ as a starting point and once again urges them to flee from sinful heathen life all around them, the life in which they had also walked before their regeneration. Peter further urges them to show in their walk of life that they earnestly seek only the praise of Jesus Christ and the honour of God's name who has shown them such great mercy in his dear Son.

MAIN THOUGHTS

These verses can be divided into two parts. In verses 1-6 Peter admonishes the readers to reveal their membership in Christ by no longer living according to their former evil lusts. This is the negative aspect of the admonition. In verses 7-11 the apostle gives his positive admonition. The hope into which they have been reborn and dominated by the imminent end of the world must motivate them to live a full Christian life which can demonstrate the glory of the Lord.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

Verse 1

"Arm yourselves" indicates the serious situation in which the congregation finds itself: their life is being threatened by their own carelessness. They must do so "with the same attitude" or "thought" [RSV] which Christ fulfilled when he suffered in the flesh. He endured his great suffering, bearing in mind, "In this way I free from sin, I bring rest from sin" — [see question 1](#). Some exegetes translate this as "withdraws oneself" or "brings oneself to rest from sin". However, in this case it is an unacceptable translation even though the Greek idiom permits this, for it would promote the unscriptural idea that the believers' bodily suffering would bring them rest from sin or that suffering would therefore contain an element of merit — [see question 2](#). The Greek verb forms for "has suffered" and "has ceased" differ in this respect: the former indicates a completed action (the suffering is over, finished); the latter indicates a continuous action (the bringing to rest goes on and on). "He who has suffered in his body" does not indicate a believer's personal suffering, but rather his participation in and enjoyment of the fruit of Christ's suffering. "Arm yourselves also with the same attitude", therefore, is the continuous activity of faith of those who follow Christ — [see question 3](#).

Verse 2

The admonition continues in this verse. The continuous activity of faith must be sealed by the permanent life of conversion. "Lusts" [NASB] or "evil human desires" are the sinful desires of the old man. The Greek word for "will" indicates God's revealed will, his commandments.

For "live", the original text uses a verb derived from *bios*, or life (think of "biology"). In Greek there are two words for life: *bios* (life that we live) and *zôê* (as in "zoology", for example; life, through which we live). "To live" here means the life that we lead. "In the flesh" [NASB] means our earthly, bodily existence (cf. Philippians 1:22).

Verse 3

"What pagans choose to do" can also be translated as "the will of the Gentiles". The original here uses a different word for "will" than it does in verse 2 ("will of God"), a word which indicates deliberation and consultation. The "pagans" are the unbelievers — see question 4. The Greek verb form for "doing" or "to have carried out" [NASB] points to the result. "Living in", "having pursued" [NASB], or, "having gone" means it is forever a thing of the past. "Detestable idolatries" are "unlawful", "against the law" — see question 5.

Verse 4

"Dissipation" means "wickedness". Because the believers reject this way of life, they are considered abnormal, and that causes the Gentiles to malign them.

Verse 5

The word for "give account" is the same one as in Luke 16:2. In connection with the whole letter, it is most logical to think of "him who is ready" as Christ.

Verse 6

This is one of the most difficult verses of this letter to explain. Pay attention to the context! The living and the dead will be judged. However, in this verse not all the dead are referred to. For the Greek text would have had to say: "The dead". It says, "to dead people the Gospel was preached..." Does Peter wish to say that this happened after they had died? No, for he says that the Gospel was preached to them in order that they might be judged "in the flesh" (that is, "bodily") "according to men" (that is, in a human way, as people do it; cf. Galatians 1:11; Galatians 3:15). They were alive when the Gospel came to them — see question 6. This, therefore, speaks of those believers who have already been taken away by God. "Judged in regard to the body" here indicates "dying bodily, temporary death". Going by appearances, those brothers and sisters who had already passed away had no advantage over the Gentiles, but, in reality, the Gospel which they accepted exercised tremendous power. They live "in respect to the spirit" (that is, their innermost being) "according to God", "like God" [RSV], having been brought to rest from sin.

Verse 7

"The end of all things" is the finish line at the end of the dispensation in which we live. "Is at hand" [NASB] means, "has come near". The Greek verb form again indicates the use of a line. Therefore, this is not a "mistake" on Peter's part, as if he meant that the last day will come within the foreseeable future. He points to the seriousness of the situation. Now is the best (most favourable) time for the believers to show the fruits of the proclamation of the Gospel. They must continually say "no" to the entire wicked, heathen life. The life of faith finds its climax in the communion of prayer. In the serious situation in which these believers find themselves, their prayers must be sensible and sober.

Verses 8 and 9

"Above all" means "before all things". There can be real prayer only when there is love. In this dangerous situation the unity of the believers must be evident. They must stand in the world as a select body of people. (cf. "love covers..." to Proverbs 10:12; 1 Corinthians 13:7; James 5:20)

"Offer hospitality", towards travellers or perhaps even towards brothers and sisters driven out of house and home. This may not be done reluctantly or sulkily, but "without grumbling."

Verse 10

From the Greek verb is derived our word "deacon". God gives every gift in order that we *diakonis*, serve one another with it — see question 7. From the Greek word for "stewards" (cf. Luke 16:1; Galatians 4:2), *oikonomos*, our words "economist" and "economy" are derived.

“Various forms” or "manifold" [NASB] translate as "multicoloured".

Verse 11

"Speaks" here indicates prophetic speaking, proclaiming God's Word, and that must be God's Word alone. "Serves" has a somewhat more limited meaning here than it did in verse 10. Here it means ministering to the needs of the brotherhood, in whatever way that may be. When he says, "in all things" the apostle means "in all those instances of service".

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is there any indication of the ransoming nature of Christ's work in verse 1?
2. Why is the idea that 'suffering contains an element of merit' unscriptural (cf. Romans 3:27, 28; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Ephesians 1:8-9)?
3. May that activity of faith discussed in verse 1 be described in this way: "When Christ suffered and died in the year 3, I suffered, I died, I was withdrawn from sin..."?
4. Can you show that we must not think here (in 4:3) of Jews, but of Gentiles?
5. On which occasions was the heathen way of life clearly revealed (cf. 4:4)?
6. Can verse 6 be used as proof that Christ would yet preach to dead people? What does the Scripture teach us concerning the possibility of preaching the Gospel after death (cf. Hebrews 9:27)?
7. Is the idea that 'we receive gifts from God in order to serve one another' also found in our Confessions (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 55; Belgic Confession, Article 28)?

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