

Peter's Epistles #3

The Plan of God

(also available on-line at www.ICHTHYS.com)

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Review and Overview: Peter was writing to Christians in Asia Minor who had been believers in Christ for some time, but were beginning to be distracted from God's plan and purpose for their lives. They were allowing personal suffering and the complications of life to shake their faith and make them doubt that God's grace was sufficient to deal with their problems. Peter too had faced a tremendous amount of suffering in his life, but had avoided the potential distraction this posed to his spiritual growth and service by recognizing his own insufficiency (his name, *Petros*, means, essentially, "[just] a little pebble [in God's plan]"). Instead of relying on himself, Peter chose to rest in the power of God (1Pet.5:7). This is the attitude of true humility which brings God's blessing (1Pet.5:5). In his two epistles to his hurting congregation in Asia Minor, Peter tries to teach these hard-pressed recipients of his letter this vital lesson from the outset: *while the world may measure success in terms of wealth, power, and fame, and may consider your sickness, poverty, loneliness, persecution and the like a reproach, God has a different standard. The Christian who trusts Him is the real success.*

Revised Translation of 1st Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit's consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!

Exegesis: *to those though outcasts dispersed yet selected:* We have already considered the ostracism and outright persecution which these early Christians endured for their beliefs. Instead of down-playing the problems his audience was experiencing, Peter acknowledges their sufferings. He calls them *parepidemioi* (outcasts), a Greek word meaning someone who is only visiting as a stranger or an exile (cf. Heb.11:13-16), and goes on to compare them to a scattered nation, using the Greek word *diaspora* (i.e., dispersion; often transliterated and used of scattered Israel). Yes, says Peter, we Christians do live as strangers on this earth, scattered and dispersed. From the world's point of view this is indeed a pitiable state. To the world, we are outcasts, even rejects, but to God we are special, selected as holy from out of a profane world. The Greek word used here, *eklektos* (select, elect), means that as Christians we have been "chosen out" of the

world, that we have been expressly selected by God as His special possessions forever, so that while we may still be *in the world*, we are no longer truly *of the world*. For this reason, we can expect the world's hostility as our Lord warned us (Jn.15:18-19). We may well join with Peter's correspondents, however, in asking why, if God has chosen us, we still remain here on earth enduring suffering which in many cases is so extreme? To answer this question, we will need to consider the Plan of God and what the Bible has to say about suffering.

The Plan of God:

1. *The Overall Plan of God:* Before the dawn of time, God existed in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Gen.1:1; Jn.8:58). We know from various statements in the Bible that at this time, before the creation, God produced His plan. His plan delineates all history, human and angelic (d). It is a plan so perfect and complete, that it comprises every temporal event, no matter how minute, from the beginning to the end of time. God's omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, and infinity mean that He exceeds time and space to an infinite degree. Therefore the task of designing and controlling all activity in the universe for all time, while mind-boggling to us, is easily within His capabilities (we should remember His power whenever we slip into an attitude of doubt: He can do it, whatever it may be).

a. *The Divine Purpose:* God is perfect. He cannot gain or lose anything. He needs nothing from us (Acts 17:25). Isaiah tells us that God created us "for His glory" (Is.43:7), that is, to make manifest His perfection, His righteous and goodness. Time and space and the Plan of God that governs them both were all constructed for us, His creatures (Is.45:18), that we might come to know Him, love Him, and reflect the glory of His person.

b. *The Divine Plan:* We know, however, that not all His creatures (whether human or angelic) choose to serve Him. God could easily have constructed a universe where all people obey Him as naturally as plants turn to face the sun. Instead, He desired that those who serve Him choose to do so of their own free will. In His immense wisdom, God fashioned a plan which took into account the free will actions of all His moral creatures before they yet existed (Jer.1:5). Before God said "Let there be light" (Gen.1:3), He set the course of history according to his plan, and did so without compromising the free will of His creatures in any way: He was simply intelligent enough (in fact omniscient) to know "what we would do before we did it" and powerful enough (in fact omnipotent) to incorporate these actions into His plan. Therefore we should not imagine that God merely has the ability to intervene in history, but realize that He ratified and established every action that would take place before the dawn of time.

c. *The Satanic Rebellion:* History contains much that is unpalatable. History contains evil. Evil is not from God, but originates in the free will of God's creatures as they rebel against His will. Satan (along with his followers) rebelled against God (Is.14:12ff.;

Ezek.28:12-19), and in turn tempted man to sin (Gen.3). By their own free will, our first parents alienated themselves from God. God's plan, however, had taken this into account from the beginning, and provided a means for mankind to choose once again to serve and follow Him in the person and saving work of His Son, Jesus Christ. So when the Father, in company with the Son and Holy Spirit, decreed history, it was no arbitrary act for it involved great cost beyond our understanding. For the Plan of God would necessitate the eventual incarnation of the Son, both the sacrifice of Him by the Father, and the Son's acceptance of a life of intense suffering, culminating in His death for us all on the cross (Lk.24:26; Acts 2:23; 2Cor.9:15; Phil.6-8; 1Pet.1:11; 1:20). When we put our faith in Jesus, we are acknowledging this great act of divine mercy and thus showing forth the glory of God (for which purpose we were created).

2. *The Three Phases of God's Plan for Believers:* In Romans chapter 8, Paul gives us a schematic treatment, so to speak, that links God's overall plan with His specific plan for individual believers. Paul takes us from eternity past to eternity future when he says that we have been "foreknown" (had our free will taken into account in eternity past), "foreordained" (written into the overall Plan of God), "called" (given the opportunity to believe in Christ), "justified" (saved and taken into the family of God), and "glorified" (our future resurrection foreseen). Paul's treatment thus explains how our lives fit into the Plan of God, and, specifically, into what can be best thought of as the *three phases* of the Plan of God for us as individual believers in Christ:

a. *The Believer at Salvation:* God means for all to be saved by the simple act of trusting in Jesus (Jn.1:12; Jn.3:16; Eph.2:4-9; 2Tim.1:9). *Having been **foreordained** and **called**, we are **justified** at the point of faith in Christ.*

b. *The Believer in Time:* God means for us to persevere in our salvation (1Pet.2:2; Phil.2:12). We should all continue in His plan in the same way in which we began. We hear a bit of divine truth (the gospel which states that by faith in Christ we are saved), and we believe it. In like fashion, we grow by assimilating the whole realm of divine truth, and by believing it. As we retain truth through belief, it changes us (Rm.12:1-2), and causes us to grow spiritually. It is important to note that such growth is from the inside out. We do not grow by altering our behavior to conform to some artificial system or code. Nevertheless, true spiritual growth does cause changes in behavior, but right changes for the good. One important change desired by God is that all believers might come to do their part in the plan (1Cor.12.12-31; Eph.2:10). All Christians receive some sort of spiritual gift at salvation (1Cor.12:11). True production, however, is a result of spiritual growth, and never a means to it. *Having been **justified**, that is, accounted righteous by God as a result of our faith in Christ, we are now to act righteously throughout our earthly lives.*

c. *The Believer in Eternity:* After this life is over, there will no longer be any tears, for the old things will have passed away (Rev.21:4). We will be with the Lord forever (Rm.5:9-10; 1Thes.4:13-18), and can look forward to a blissful eternity (Rev.21:9-22:5),

and, ultimately, to the resurrection of our earthly bodies and their transformation into the future, glorious state promised us by the Lord (1Cor.15:50-58). *Having been faithful to Christ in this life, we are **glorified** through resurrection at the return of our Lord.*

3. *The Plan of God and You:* God has a plan for you, an individual purpose that is uniquely yours. He knew you in eternity past, long before you existed. He loved you enough then to send His only Son to die on the cross for you. He did this for you before you turned to Him. How much more will He not then give you everything you need now that you do believe (Rm.5:6-11)? God knows about your problems, both the obvious difficulties you face, and the secret pain and suffering you bear in your heart. He is sufficient for all these needs. In eternity, there will be no problems. Only here in time, in the midst of the devil's world, will He have the opportunity to demonstrate His faithfulness to you in these things. Only in time will you have the chance to respond to His love and, in faith, meet the challenge of the adversities which face you, in the firm belief that He does care for you and will somehow provide an answer to all your needs. In eternity we will see everything clearly, just as He sees it (1Cor.13:12), but as long as we are still in this world, our vision is limited. Here on earth we must stride forward *by faith* (2Cor.5:7; Heb.11:1), depending not upon what our earthly eyes tell us, but upon what we know and believe to be true from the only reliable source of truth, the Word of God.

Summary: According to the world's "eyes", the addressees of first Peter were failures, and they had come to accept this view themselves and ask "Why, God?" Peter responds by telling them that though they are indeed worthless in the sight of this world, they are of the utmost importance to the only Person who really matters: the Creator of the world and their Savior. A God who can plan the course of galaxies and the placement of every grain of sand on every beach can surely handle your problems as well. He has the ability to care for you, the desire to do so, and has in fact been faithfully shepherding you your whole life. We need to draw encouragement from the remembrance of these things, and persevere in His plan by continuing to grow spiritually. To answer the first part of the question that the suffering believers of Peter's day were asking, ***we are here in the world to fulfill God's plan for our lives.*** Faithfulness on our part brings eternal blessings and rewards which will never fade (2Cor.4:17), in contrast to the transitory nature of all things worldly (1Cor.3:10-15). We shall examine the crucial role which suffering plays in spiritual growth in our next study.