

# What Should Be An 'Alien's' Lifestyle In The Midst of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritichie

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Ever since I was 19 years old, I have had the privilege of traveling in many countries all over the world. But I have always traveled with certain feelings of apprehension. I noticed this more than ever before on our last trip to Columbia for the prison ministry. We had heard that the M-19 guerillas were capturing Americans and holding them for ransom. The prisons had come under closer surveillance and there were more and more lock downs; fights and knivings were more frequent. Then there were the usual problems of not being able to drink the water, or eat certain foods; it wasn't safe to jog alone, etc. When I returned home, I recognized that I would always feel that way whenever I traveled. That is because I'm always an alien when I'm in another land. It was so nice to get to Florida, to have a Coke and read the local newspaper! It's not perfect, but it's comfortable. I'm a citizen of the United States! I know the ways and the folk--ways of this land.

In one sense, this is what the apostle Peter was trying to convey to the Christians in Asia Minor in his first letter. While it was true that they were living in a Roman colony, and that resulted in certain rights and privileges, as they had become Christians, they had a second passport which entitled them to citizenship in heaven. But one of the results of their new citizenship was that they now were suffering in political, social and personal ways because they were strangers--aliens on this earth. They were suspected of belonging to a strange cult that indulged in mystical practices--like eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their victims, for instance; therefore they were ostracized by society. But, despite all this, Peter counsels them to "hang in there." Earth was not their home; they were just passing through.

To encourage them, the apostle gives them a blueprint on how to live on earth as aliens in the midst of suffering. First, they were to be holy, as their Father is holy; secondly, they were to conduct themselves in fear; and thirdly, they were to fervently love one another.

Let's turn to 1 Peter and see how he answers the question, "What should be an 'alien's' lifestyle in the midst of suffering?" First Peter 1:13-16:

## 1. Be holy 1:13-16

**Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."**

Apparently the word had gotten back to Peter that these Christians in Asia Minor were having tremendous struggles. As we will see in a moment, some of these struggles were caused by people in their immediate community who were giving them a hard time. Peter therefore wants them to prepare their hearts, their minds and their spirits so that they will be able to function in society. He will give them first, general instructions, and later, more specific instructions to cover specific circumstances and situations, e.g., how to relate to their neighbors, to the government, etc.

The apostle begins this section of the letter with the word, "Therefore." In light of all the truth he has shared with them up to this point--they had been born again, they were new creations, their Savior Christ was coming again--the first words of encouragement to the Christian community are, "gird your minds for action." In that

Middle East culture--even today--men wore great robes which reached down to their feet. When they wanted to move quickly, they lifted up their robes and tucked them into their belts so that they were free to run. This is the picture the apostle has in mind. He is advising these people to "gird" their minds, in the same way the Jews in Egypt were told by Moses to eat the Passover meal in a state of readiness, as they would have to move quickly when the angel of death passed over their houses. The Jews were to gird their loins, put on their sandals, and eat the feast with staff in hand, waiting for the word to move out of Egypt.

Thus Peter is telling these Christians that just as the Jews in Egypt were ready to move at a moment's notice, they should have no moral impediments to hold them back. They should think God's thoughts after Him. Having "girded their minds" in the past, they would be able to understand what God wanted them to do during their short stay in an alien world. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed (fashioned, or guided) to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may prove what the will of God is." They were surrounded by trials, by pressure, by affliction; thus they should "gird their minds" so that they would understand the reasons behind that suffering. Then they would not be fashioned nor conformed to what was going on in the world.

I was reminded of this verse while driving along the ocean on Highway 1 recently. It's a beautiful drive, with the ocean on one side and the emerald fields on the other side of the highway. I saw a sign that read, "Three Ranches for Sale," and I hungered for a moment, thinking how nice it would be to own a ranch overlooking the ocean. As soon as I thought that, however, the Lord got a hold of me with the words, "Gird your mind. You're not going to be here long enough to enjoy a ranch even if you could afford to buy one!" That's what it means to "gird our minds." It's to bring our thoughts into captivity to the thoughts of the Lord so we don't get caught up emotionally.

Secondly, Peter says, "Keep sober in spirit." Don't be drunk with fear, anxiety, and temptations to revenge. Be self-controlled and calm; be at peace.

Thirdly, "fix your hope completely on the grace (the salvation) to be brought at the revelation of Christ." Here Peter is issuing a command: "Keep looking toward your glorification, which will be fully unveiled when Christ is unveiled. You have been saved, you are being saved, and you will be saved, so don't get off course."

I was reminded of this yesterday when I was at the helm of a sailboat on a voyage from San Francisco to Santa Cruz--a 12-hour sail. Around Davenport, the winds really picked up. We had on a full spinnaker and were making 14 knots. Tacking is very difficult in that kind of wind, so the navigator shouted to me as helmsman, "Pick a point of land ahead, let the wind fill that sail completely, and don't take your eyes off that point!" What an illustration for what the Lord is telling us through Peter in this verse! I thought to myself, "Pick a point!" That point for Christians, of course, should be Jesus Christ. No matter how the winds blow, no matter how the crew members rush to and from, no matter how scared the children aboard are (no matter how scared is the helmsman!), pick a point! If you do, you will arrive at your destination. The world is filled with distractions that can cast you off course. The winds blow from all directions, so Christians must set their sights on a point, and that point is Jesus.

Fourthly, Peter issues his second command, "Be holy." "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in ignorance." According to John 1:12, they had become children of God: "Yet to all who received Him, He gave the right to become the children of God."

First, Peter deals with some negatives. "Do not be like the children of ignorance. Once you were caught up in sensuality, in drunkenness and idolatry. Don't go back to that time, when you didn't understand what God wanted from you." It's amazing how many people have no idea of what God wants of human beings. A couple of weeks ago, I had to copy the Ten Commandments for a person who had never heard of them! Such people are ignorant of the mind of God; they don't understand.

But Christians are not that way anymore. Based on the Word of God, we know what God wants from us. As His children, we are to keep walking in obedience to Him. Although we are sometimes tempted to allow the world to fashion our response, we now have the power of the resurrected Christ to enable us to withstand these temptations. A beautiful young woman from our Careers ministry said to me last week, "Can you believe it? Since

I gave my life to the Lord, rather than going out on a date on Friday nights, now I go to a Bible study. Even more amazing is the fact that I love going to it. I don't even miss doing what I used to do before I became a Christian." That's what Peter is saying here. Don't get caught up with your old habits and your old friends again, but "be holy."

Now, on the positive side, the apostle says, "He like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior; because it is written, 'you shall be holy, for I am holy.'" To be "holy" means to be set apart--to be wholesome and sound; to be separated from all that is sinful and impure; to be set apart unto God and become conformed to His character. God is entirely free from any form of evil. He is a Being of absolute moral perfection. "There is none holy as the Lord," was the cry of Samuel's mother Hannah. Peter quotes Leviticus 11: "You shall be holy, for I am holy," to illustrate that God's desire for Christians is the same as His desire was for Israel of old, when He instructed them to stay away from unclean animals and not to participate in the Canaanite practices of sexual immorality, idolatry and witchcraft. In the words of Leviticus 20:26, "Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the people to be Mine."

Again this is a command from the apostle Peter: "Be holy as your Heavenly Father is holy." Christians are to make conscious choices to allow the indwelling Lord to set them free from a lifestyle of sin and be set apart to live a holy life, and thus experience wholeness. What the world has to offer doesn't make Christians feel "whole" in any sense of the word. It makes them feel used, abused, guilty, shameful and empty. "Do not be conformed to that; don't buy it," is Peter's command. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "Don't you know that you are God's temple and that His Spirit dwells in you? For the temple of God is holy." That is what you are--not what you will be someday. You are holy right now. When you participate now in some of those evil practices you used to be involved in as a non-Christian, you don't feel "whole" anymore--you feel weird! That's because, according to God's standard, you are "holy." His holy standards and the world's evil practices just don't mix, and they never will.

Thus, Peter tells these Christians, in light of their present and future salvation, that they were to consider their present suffering as a season of testing and maturing until Christ returned. Meanwhile, they were to gird their minds for action; to keep sober in spirit; to fix their hope completely on the unveiling of Jesus Christ; and to be holy in all of their behavior.

What should be an "alien's" lifestyle in the midst of suffering? Secondly, Peter says,

## 2. Conduct yourselves in fear 1:17-21

**And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ for He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.**

Peter is saying, "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work,' then you must realize that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is also our Father. And while He is a God of mercy, love, grace and compassion, He is also an impartial Judge." Because God is the Creator of the world, He is also the Judge of the world. He set up certain laws in order to bring righteousness to a society that would fall apart without them. Further, this Judge can't be bribed, conned or manipulated. He is not a man, but a perfect, righteous Judge--the Judge of the whole world. He searches the hearts of mankind, looking for what motivates man: "For God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Thus God is forever checking our motives, not our activity. I was on a plane last week and I overheard one man say to another, "I like your suit." The other man replied, "Oh, I don't wear suits at all usually. I wear jeans. I just wore this so I could con some businessmen, get my order and go home." But God can't be conned. He reads hearts. The outward actions of man should match the inward motives of his heart. Let your "yes" be yes and your

"no" be no; and let your words be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Heavenly Father is also a Judge of power who executes sentence, rewarding good with good and evil with punishment. All wrongs will be righted one day by this impartial Judge.

But Christians know that they are free from judgment because of the death of Christ. Am I glad that my sins will never be brought up again! My good works are what will be evaluated. According to the Scriptures, those good works are given to us: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." As we are walking in these good works, the impartial Judge will evaluate our motives, not to condemn us, but in order to bring us to Christ-like maturity.

When Paul was being harassed by Judaizers, he responded in this way, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the One who examines me is the Lord. Therefore, do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise (not condemnation) will come to him from God" (1 Corinthians 4:3-5). Because of our backgrounds, most of us are thoroughly convinced that when we meet Jesus Christ, He will put us across His knee and whale on us! But that's not what the Bible says. He simply wants to show us the difference between works done in the flesh and works done in the Spirit while we were here on earth.

According to 1 Corinthians 3, Paul understood that all of our works are either wood, hay and stubble, or gold, silver and precious stones. At judgment, the former will be burned because they are without value, but works done in the Spirit will last; they will have eternal value. I did a wedding about two years ago and said all the right words etc., but when I got in my car to go home, I just sat there and said to myself, "Wood, hay and stubble! What an unproductive day for eternity! The people at the wedding were blessed, but I lose." It's encouraging to know that the judgment of 1 Corinthians 3 is going on right now, and if we will judge those situations immediately, they will not be brought up later. That wedding will never come up because I judged it. And don't you dare bring it up either! You're going to have enough trouble of your own! Paul wrote that the judgment seat was one motivating factor for his ministry: "Therefore we have as our ambition to be pleasing to Him. For we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

In light of this truth that we are being judged now by our impartial Judge as to our motives in our good works, this should sober us and effect a change from an irresponsible lifestyle to one where we are daily aware of the reality that we are being held accountable for our lives, our time, our gifts, and the opportunities placed before us by God.

So Peter issues the command that Christians should fix their hope on the coming of Christ; secondly, that they should "be holy;" and thirdly, that they should conduct themselves in fear during their stay on earth. He is not talking about being terror-stricken, but saying that Christians should order their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that they fear self-trust and self-confidence. They fear the flesh, and are careful to live lives that respect the wishes of their loving Heavenly Father who is also their impartial Judge.

Then Christians should understand the price of their redemption: "knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile ways of life inherited from your forefathers." Here Peter is reminding his readers that while Israel was redeemed from Egypt, they had been redeemed out of the slave market of sin and death and shame and bondage, by the very life of Christ. The apostle is using a Jewish term and applying it to the Christian community that is made up of Gentiles. "You Gentiles," he is saying, "were redeemed by God from your empty lives in which you were held captive by your Adamic nature of sensuality, drunkenness and idolatry. 'Your life is no longer your own, you were brought with a price.'"

During our last trip to Columbia, an inmate from one of the prisons there helped our team by carrying our electric piano down a long hill, over a swinging bridge with a river below, and placing it on a bus. Covered in perspiration, he approached me and through an interpreter said to me, "Sir, would you redeem me?" I asked a guard, "What is

he talking about?" The guard told me, "Our policy is that men who have served their sentences still can't get out of prison unless someone redeems them by paying ransom money." I asked the man how much would it cost to redeem him. "One thousand pesos," he replied, "and I already have 200, so I need 800. Please redeem me." "How much is that?" I asked. "Eight dollars," I was told. "Eight dollars!" I said, "I could redeem this whole prison!" I reached in my pocket and "redeemed" this man.

What a joy to redeem a human being! As I handed him the money, I said to him through the interpreter, "I can redeem you from this hellhole, I can set you free--here's the money--but I'm only able to set you free physically. There is One whose name is Jesus Christ who can redeem you for eternity if you'll put your faith in Him." I'll never forget that man as long as I live. He helped me understand redemption for the first time, and now I have an idea of God's joy in redeeming us. I didn't know that man from anybody. He didn't do one good thing for me. That's called mercy. That's called love. That's remembering that we were set free once. All we're doing is passing that on to someone else. The price of that man's redemption was \$8. The price of your redemption and my redemption was the life of Jesus Christ.

That is what Peter goes on to talk about--the price tag of our redemption: "with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ." The apostle is constantly referring to Old Testament truths that he applies to the new Christian community made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Here he is referring to the Passover lamb which was killed as a sin offering for the Jews, and saying that that lamb became Jesus Christ; that innocent, spotless, blameless Lamb was killed so that they could be ransomed from their sins. That was the price tag of their salvation, as that Lamb was crucified on Passover--the last Passover Lamb. Now all our sins and our rebellion have been transferred to Him and forgiven. Titus says, "Jesus Christgave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:13-14).

Not only are Christians to remember the judgment seat and the price of their redemption, but they are to place their faith and hope in God. This should have a very positive effect on the Christian's desire to live a lifestyle of holiness and accountability. The salvation of Gentiles was not an afterthought, but a forethought in the mind of God: "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for your sake." In the words of Paul, "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). Peter says, "Understand that through Christ you are believers in God who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory so that your faith and hope are in God." In other words, "Hang in there. Don't waste your lives in irresponsibility. The same God who allowed His Son to suffer will also allow you to suffer. But He raised Jesus to glory and He will raise you to glory also." You were redeemed. The price was the life of the Lord. And, because He was raised from the dead, you too can look forward to that glory.

What should be an "alien's" lifestyle in the midst of suffering? First, be holy; secondly, conduct yourselves in fear; and thirdly,

### 3. Love one another from the heart 1:22-25

**Since you have, in obedience, to the truth purified your soul for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable, that is, 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 flowers fall off, But the word of the Lord abides forever." And this is the word which was preached to you.**

These Christians in Asia Minor were not only suffering due to pressures from the community around, but now, having been born again, they were struggling with members of their own spiritual family. Jews and Gentiles were

now brothers in Christ, masters and slaves were now brothers, so all the relationships they were accustomed to had changed. Peter says, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your soul for a sincere love of the brethren" (in other words, since you have come to know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior); "God has cleansed you; you are pure. That has happened in the past. Now I want you to reach out in sincere love to the brethren. I want you to have genuine affection, without hypocrisy, for one another. I want you to reach out in 'agape' love, to stretch yourselves out in sacrificial love for one another."

That problem still exists in the church today. There is plenty of "phileo" love demonstrated among Christians, but not nearly enough "agape" love. Peter is asking for self-sacrificial love for other people. It's hard; it's very inconvenient to do that. You can lose a whole weekend doing it! You can even lose weeks because you care about someone else. But that's the way Peter wants us to live: in fervent love for one another from the heart. And that does not allow complaining inside or to other people that you have stretched yourself out to minister to somebody. By the power of the Holy Spirit, adopt a lifestyle of constantly reaching out, going beyond the normal bounds to a fervent love for the brethren.

Learning how to do that is a process. We are all so different from each other. Sometimes we feel if others would just live like we want them to live, we could really get along. But no, no one checks with us. People just show up in our lives with their strange (to us) habits, their different manners, different dress, looks, smell, etc. Then when we do stretch out to people, we complain because we are doing all the stretching and there's none coming from the other side! How about a little mutual stretching? But, Peter tells us, we have been purified, we have been born again, and those realities have immediate consequences in our lives to enable us to love one another right now. We have been "born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable the living and abiding word of God."

Here Peter quotes Isaiah 40, saying that it was the Spirit and the word of God, spoken and written, that changed their lives, and that eternal word of truth continues to speak to mankind in every generation, in all societies. It is an unchanging, vital, ever-present truth. Hebrews says, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Every generation has the same experience of looking into this Word and seeing a reflection of itself. This is no temporary, passing word. It meets people's needs and gives them a sense of direction and wholeness. Because of this living word, Peter directs his readers to put their faith and hope in the God who gave His word to mankind. In contrast, all men and their glory pass away like the grass and the flowers. You have had this truth preached to you, Peter is saying, listen to it. God's word has eternal truth that needs to be obeyed, as it has eternal consequences. As you have been born again, you have the power of the resurrected Lord available to you to help you cope with present realities.

What should be an "alien's" lifestyle in the midst of suffering? First, we should "be holy for I am holy." Having "girded our minds for action," we should "keep sober in spirit," and we should "fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ," and "be holy" in all our behavior.

Secondly, we should "conduct ourselves in fear during the time of our stay on earth." That is, in fear that we will trust ourselves to do this. Don't become self-confident. Walk in light of the fact that God will judge our works, so we should continually check our motives. We have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. He will now express His life in us as we walk in reverence and obedience to Him.

Thirdly, we should "love one another from the heart." Love one another with "agape" love, even when those to whom we reach out don't respond in kind. And make sure that love is from the heart, produced by our Lord's indwelling life.

If we follow Peter's inspired directions, we will know how to live as aliens during our time on earth. Others may not always react the way we would wish, but that will not deflect us from being men and women who possess a sense of wholeness, soundness, purpose and direction. The point to which we aim our spiritual compass should be Jesus Christ and His second coming. Let us keep our eyes on Him in fair and foul weather alike.

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