

How Can We be Spiritually Mature In The Midst Of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

On my first trip to Columbia to take part in the prison ministry there, I was speaking to a group of about 70 men and women, all ex-prisoners, in a convent one afternoon. I was nearing the end of my remarks when a little man walked into the meeting, and the whole group came alive with excitement and anticipation. I hurriedly finished what I was saying, realizing that the man would probably want to say something to those present. I sat down with an interpreter and he told me that this man had killed four people and he had been sent to prison for 25 years. While there, he had been led to Christ by another prisoner. Shortly afterward, his sentence had been reduced, then it was reduced again down to six years, and the very day I was speaking to this crowd, his sentence was up. He came to Bogota to see all his friends, discovered that they were all at the meeting, so he took a taxi out to the convent and joined us.

The man shared with the group two things, the first of which was very amusing: he told us his real name. When I asked the interpreter why everybody laughed when he shared this information, I was told that criminals in Columbia change their names whenever they commit a crime so there is only one crime per name on their records. When this man shared his real name, that was a mark of bona fide Christianity! The second thing he shared made a very deep impression on me. "Because all of you know me," he said, "you know that I can't read nor write, so you must teach me everything you know about Jesus." When I heard this, chills ran up and down my spine. I felt how very fortunate I was, and what a responsibility the people listening to him had to tell him everything they knew about the Lord. He had a deep desire to become spiritually mature.

All Christians should consider for themselves the question, "How can we become spiritually mature in the midst of suffering?" Let us continue our studies in the first letter of Peter, where this morning we will find three answers to this question. First, we must realize our need for the Word of God (2:1-3); secondly, realize our firm foundation (2:4-8); and thirdly, realize our message of hope (2:9-10).

Peter is writing to Christians in Asia Minor in 64 A.D. to encourage them to bear up during a difficult time of political, social and personal suffering. We saw last week that these Christians were struggling with members of their own spiritual family.

1. Realize our need for the Word 2:1-3

Therefore, putting aside all malice and guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

The "therefore" refers back to 1:22-23, where Peter encourages believers to have "agape" love for one another. Part of the maturing process, he is saying, is the ability to know, discern and choose between good and evil, between the flesh and the spirit, between what causes unity and disunity, between what pleases and displeases God. All that is part of spiritual maturity; as Hebrews 5 puts it, that is the ability to discern the difference between good and evil.

First, Peter speaks of some negative things. "Put aside" these things, he is saying. This has the idea of taking off an old coat and putting on a new one; put off the old nature and put on the new nature. This is the same concept Paul speaks of in Ephesians 4:22-24: "Lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth"--an old coat for a new coat.

Peter goes on to list some of these negative things which, having put them aside at a point in time in the past, they should continue to do as a lifestyle. When these people in Asia Minor became Christians, their friends began to malign, ridicule and challenge them because they were no longer involved in sensuality, drunkenness and idolatry. But here Peter encourages them to "turn the other cheek," to "walk that extra mile," to not react in kind. Thus he directs them to "put aside" as a lifestyle, first, "all malice." "Malice" is wickedness in all its forms--sensuality, drunkenness and idolatry. "Guile," is craftiness, deceit, setting traps. (Here Peter may be referring to shady business dealings.) "Hypocrisy" is play-acting, which is the opposite of the "sincere love" he talked about in the previous chapter.

"Envy" is displeasure produced by witnessing or hearing of the prosperity of others. A couple of weeks ago, a group of my friends went on a sailing trip and never called me! I knew I was home because that's where I was when I was envious! I even checked my phone number to see if it had been changed! I was really upset that I hadn't been invited. But then the Lord pointed out to me that that was envy.

Finally, Peter says, having put aside slander, keep putting it away. Slander is backbiting, cutting down, gossiping, character assassination. That's the one we struggle with, isn't it? It's so tempting to cut people down because it makes us better, it lifts us up as they go down. But no matter what gossip you've heard, no matter how tempted you are to share it with others, bite your tongue, for Proverbs 6:16-19 says,

**There are six things which the Lord hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that run rapidly to evil,
A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers.**

In a recent National Geographic article, I read that Tibetans don't eat fish. Since fish have no tongues, they say, they cannot gossip; and since Tibetans consider gossip a cardinal sin, they reward fish for their virtue by not eating them.

Peter now moves from the negative to the positive by using a metaphor to illustrate the lifestyle God desires for His children, regardless of the various trials they are undergoing. He commands, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word." Peter is not saying that all Christians are newborn babes. He is saying that, like babes who long for milk, Christians are to have a hunger for the Word, free of the impurities of malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy and slander. Peter calls this Word, "the living word." It's the abiding word, the imperishable word, the eternal, true word, the only truth in the universe; it's the truth that helps us cope with reality, truth that is found in the life and in the words of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:23-25).

The apostle Paul shared these words with Timothy,

All who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them; and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

That's how we mature. We must hunger and long for the Word of God that will teach us the difference between truth and error, which will teach us the very mind and heart of God. As we walk by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we make the choice to put off the old and put on the new, we will become spiritually mature, sound, wholesome and healthy. We must long for the Word of God. And he will put that longing in our hearts. Don't try to do it mechanically because it will taste sour if you do. Long for it!

Peter's desire for his spiritual children is that they may grow in respect to their salvation if they have tasted of the kindness of the Lord. That's the process of sanctification. As born again believers, they were set free from the penalty of sin, now they were set free from the power of sin. They were to learn how to grow within that time period of their sanctification. "You have tasted of the kindness of the Lord," means you have established a personal relationship with Him. He is the milk and His Word is the milk. His life and His words will help you to grow in Him. In the words of Psalm 34, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Psalm 119 speaks further to this:

**How sweet are Thy words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
From Thy precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.**

Without the word of God we don't know the "false way." That's why we get in trouble. Many people don't know that certain things they are doing are called sinful by God. We must be patient with those people. Just hand them the Word of God and let the Spirit of God convict them.

Last week one of our interns called me and said, "I've been writing a lot of papers and reading so many books, I wonder if we could just get together and study the Word again? I got lost somewhere. I got so busy with all the paperwork, I want to get back to the Scripture again so that I can look at things from the bottom up." What a wonderful statement! "I want to get back to the basics."

How can we become spiritually mature in the midst of suffering? First, we need to realize our need for the Word of God. Secondly, we need to

2. Realize our firm foundation 2:4-8

And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: "Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him shall not be disappointed." This precious value, then, is for you who believe, but for those who disbelieve, "The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense;" for they stumble because they are disobedient to the Word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

Some of the terms in these quotations from Isaiah and the Psalms are unfamiliar to us, so a little background information may be helpful here with reference to the "rock," the "living stone," the "corner stone," and "spiritual house." In 1 Peter 1:22 through 2:3, Peter is focusing on the Christian's behavior within the Christian community; while in this passage, the apostle focuses on the nature of the Christian community, using some Old Testament words--imagery--which used to apply to Israel, but since they had rejected the Messiah and had been put aside, all this now applies to all Christians in the church of Christ.

First, the term, "the rock." In the Old Testament, Yahweh is called "the rock of Israel," and "the rock of individuals." Referring to Yahweh as the rock, Moses said, "His work is perfect for all His ways are just." Moses also said, "Yahweh is the rock of our salvation." Hannah, the mother of Samuel, said, "There is no rock like our God." In Psalms, David sang songs of thankfulness for deliverance from his enemies: "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my Rock, in whom I take refuge" (2 Samuel 22:2). "He only is my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken" (Psalm 62). "When my heart is faint, lead me to the Rock that is higher than I; for You have been a refuge for me" (Psalm 61). Isaiah said, "Trust in the Lord forever; for in

God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock."

So we see that in the Jewish mind, the "rock" is Yahweh, the Rock of Israel. He is their firm Foundation, the One they stand on. The attributes of this Rock are that He is perfect and just, He is a deliverer, He is unique, He is a fortress, He is a refuge, He is a stronghold, He is consistent, He is a foundation for every generation, He is eternal. "Build your life on that Rock," Peter says.

Then we have the term, the "living stone." Yahweh and His Messiah were called the "stone." Jacob described Yahweh as "the stone of Israel, for He cares for His son Joseph." When Judah was turning away from the security of God and was laying a foundation of lies in Zion, Isaiah was told by God to tell the rulers of Israel that they were going the wrong way: "Behold I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed." God declared through Isaiah that the only safe way was to put their trust in the work of the Messianic Redeemer. Daniel talked about the Stone that would destroy the image of Nebuchadnezzar, and that all the nations who at the end times desired to make alliance with the anti-Christ will be carried away in judgment because of the Stone who hits the feet of the image and smashes it. So the attributes of the Living Stone are that it is protective, reliable, precious, firm, powerful; it is a keystone, a foundation.

In the New Testament, Jesus used the word "the rock." Referring to Himself, He said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts upon them may be compared to a wise man who builds his house upon the rock. The rains descended, the floods came, the winds blew and burst against that house, and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock" (Matthew 7). The attributes of the rock are: it is firm, solid, consistent, reliable, safe; it is able to resist all the storms of life. Then there is that very famous passage in Matthew 16, when Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replied, "Lord, you are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus said to him, "I say to you that you are Peter, a stone, and upon this bedrock statement that you just made, I will build my church."

Coming back to our text, we read, "and coming to Him as a living stone, rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight." Here Peter is encouraging the Christian community to keep coming to the Lord, for He is the living Lord, the resurrected Lord, the One who would hold them together regardless of the storms of life. "Keep coming to Him," Peter says, "for He is your salvation, your peace, your hope, your inheritance, your protection, your wholeness. He is your living Lord, your living Hope, your living Word, your living Stone."

I called a young man who is suffering from cancer, Earle Craig, last week. He was away at a doctor's office because of more complications in his cancer, and I talked to his wife. I asked her how she was doing. She told me, "It's difficult, but I'm so delighted to be married to Earle. I can't believe the strength of my husband. In spite of the new pain, which he is very worried about, he said to me, 'I'm not going to give up on the Lord now. I need Him more than ever and I'm going to thoroughly trust Him for this trial. Keep with me on this.'" Here is a mother, with a young child and a four-month old baby, but she also is hanging on to the Rock, the Living Stone who, no matter what storm comes along, will stand now and forever.

But this stone, Peter says, was "rejected by men." In the words of Isaiah 53, "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows." John 1:11 says, "He came to His own, and those of His own did not receive Him." In Acts 4, Peter says to the supreme court of Israel, "Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, God raised from the dead. He is the stone which was rejected by you, I, the builders (the leaders), but which became the very cornerstone, and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Peter is saying to these Christians in Asia Minor, "This Messiah and Lord is being rejected as you now are being rejected. But as He was chosen and highly prized in God's sight, that is also true of you." Thus Peter is saying that Jesus Christ is the Living Stone, the Cornerstone, but to those who do not believe in Him, He will be a rejected stone--a stumbling stone--to their doom.

"You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Here Peter is saying that Christians are identified with the Lord and His church in a personal, intimate way. The figure of a building is used to describe this relationship. Christ is

the chosen, precious living Stone, and believers possess His life. As living stones, they constitute a spiritual house. In contrast to the temple in Jerusalem, Christians are now the temple of the Holy Spirit, the ones who contain the Living God, the very presence of the resurrected Lord and Savior, priests who offer up acceptable sacrifices to God. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the same concept: "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid in Christ Jesus." Christians' lives are also laid on that foundation. In Ephesians 2, Paul says,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Christ is our firm Foundation. On that foundation, He is building His church, you and me, whom He calls "living stones." We have stability in the midst of all the storms of life. That becomes apparent to our friends when we are facing difficult times. "Why is it that you were so strong when you were facing the death of your child?" asks one. "How come you were so calm when you were being sued recently?" asks another. "I don't understand the strength you Christians have," another declares.

What does Peter mean when he says Christians are a "holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ?" He is saying that we are placed in the world in order to bring men and women into a relationship with God, as the Levitical priests did. As people who love Jesus Christ, we function as ministers who tell others about our Lord, about the good news that God in Christ has forgiven their sins and that He now wants a personal relationship with them. As such, priests have nothing but good news to share with people--unless, of course, they reject the good news we bring.

Christians also "offer up spiritual sacrifices." In Old Testament times, priests would offer lambs as sacrifices for sin. Some lambs would then be totally burned up on the altar, which symbolized a life being offered up. The New Testament counterpart to this sacrifice is laid out for us in Romans 12:1: "I urge you, therefore, brethren, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

A second spiritual sacrifice for Christians is worship. Again, in Old Testament times, the priest led the people in the service of worship, while in New Testament times, Romans 12:1 declares that our offering of our bodies to God is our "spiritual service of worship."

Thirdly, Christians offer up their works to God. Peter says that all of our good works are "sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Ephesians 2 tells us, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We can't miss these good works unless, of course, we have the old coat on, unless we are being selfishly preoccupied with ourselves. When we are walking with Christ as Lord of our lives, good works are everywhere around us and we are to participate in them, thus we make "sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Have you ever thought of a good work in that light?

Peter goes on to quote Isaiah 28:16 from the Septuagint:

**"Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious stone,
And he who believes in Him shall not be disappointed."
This precious value, then, is for you who believe . . .**

God has given us His Messiah--Jesus. He is the stable, solid, firm, eternal and living Foundation upon whom we build our lives; He is our precious Cornerstone who is able to hold our lives together regardless of our circumstances.

Following the second service last week, I was introduced to a young man whose life was totally devastated. The woman who introduced us said to me, "I think he's ready to come into a relationship with Christ." My first thought was, "I hope not. I want to go to lunch!" That was a temptation! It wasn't sin yet! Here was this man

standing in front of me, his whole life falling apart because he had built his life on sand that was now crumbling under him. We went upstairs to my office and we talked for a while, and he bowed his head and asked Jesus Christ to become the Cornerstone of his life. That's the work of a priest--bringing people to God.

Now Peter shares the bad news:

**...but for those who disbelieve,
"The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the very cornerstone," and
"A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,"
for they stumble because they are disobedient to the
Word, and to this doom they were also appointed.**

The spiritual leaders of Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Matthew 21:42 quotes a fascinating statement by Jesus. He began, "Did you ever read in the Scriptures?" Why, they were Pharisees! Of course they had read it! But Jesus is saying, "Did you ever read it so that you understood it?" Did you ever read in the Scriptures,

**"The stone which the builders rejected,
has become the chief cornerstone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes?"**

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.

Rather than becoming a firm foundation upon which to build their lives, Peter is saying, because they had rejected Jesus Christ, He has become a stone of stumbling whom they would keep tripping over. They could not get rid of Him nor His name, His ministry nor His people. In the Book of Acts, you can see that that is what drove the Pharisees crazy. They couldn't get rid of the disciples; even when they put them in jail, people still kept coming to Christ. The Cornerstone of the universe can't be stopped from ministering in and through His people and in and through His Holy Spirit.

So the good news is that if this Lord is your Rock, you have joy, but the bad news is that if He is not your Rock, you're going to trip and stumble over Him all the time; He's always going to be in the way. He's a Rock you will trip over and a Ledge you can't climb over.

I overheard a man who attends our Careers ministry talking in a derogatory way about Jesus, so I asked him, "Why are you so angry at Jesus? I just now heard you mention His name several different times, yet you tell me you're not a Christian. Are you a religious fanatic or what? Even I don't say the name of Jesus that much. What's your problem?" "Am I really doing that?" he asked. "Yes you are," I told him. "You know, God loves you so much He won't let you stop talking about Him." I told him that when he went to pick up his friend at the airport that afternoon, to quietly count all the times he mentioned Jesus Christ in his interaction with his friend. He told me later that he had counted some 12 times. "That's the bad news," he said, "the good news is that I accepted Him because I got tired of tripping over Him." I had the privilege of marrying him recently to a Christian woman from the community.

My wife once worked in an advertising business in Philadelphia in an office staffed totally by Jews who were always talking about Jesus. Finally she told them, "Jesus Christ is my Savior and my Lord and I really love Him. It hurts me when you talk about Him like that. Can't you use someone else's name instead?" When she got home that evening, she told me that later that afternoon when one of the typists made an error in typing she pounded the typewriter carriage and shouted, "Oh Moses!"

C. S. Lewis in "Mere Christianity" said of Jesus,

He is the Sovereign Lord of the Universe. We either believe Him and make Him the foundation of our lives, or we reject Him and spend the rest of our lives falling over Him. There is no other alternative.

Peter now goes on to recall all the covenant promises and gifts which God made in the past to the nation Israel, and he infers because of Israel's rejection of the Messiah, their Cornerstone, God's wonderful plan of redemption continues on through the church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, who by faith have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, the Living Stone, the Rock on whom they have chosen to build their lives. The apostle then picks up six familiar figures and applies them to the Christian community.

How can we become spiritually mature in the midst of suffering? First, we must realize our need for the Word; secondly, we must realize our firm Foundation; and thirdly, we must

3. Realize our message of hope 2:9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for once you were not a people, but now you are a people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

"But you are . . ." (present tense), in contrast with all those who are disobedient, "a chosen race." That is what God called Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6; but now that is how Paul describes Christians in Ephesians 1:4. "A royal priesthood" is what Israel was called in Exodus 19:5-6, while in Revelation 1:6, Christians are called "a kingdom of priests." "A holy nation" is how Israel was described in Exodus 19:5; now that is applied to Christians in 1 Peter 1: "be holy in all your behavior." "A people of God's own possession" was the name applied to Israel in Deuteronomy 14, while Ephesians 1:14 speaks of God's redemption of His own people. "You were once not a people," Peter quotes from Hosea 1:10 (you were without hope, without God), but God in His great love for us has made us "people of mercy;" we had not received mercy but now we have "received mercy," which is life in Christ.

Peter then gives the reason behind God's great love for the Christian community. God expects a response to this love, and that is, in Peter's words, "that you may proclaim (that you may call out) the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." We have a responsibility not merely to be Christians, or priests, or a holy nation, or to walk around with all kinds of credit cards in our pocket from a Sovereign God which admit us to all kinds of clubs. That's not what God wants us to do. He has put us in a fallen world so that we might call out the message of hope to people that Jesus Christ is the Foundation of our lives, that He is the Cornerstone of our lives, that He is the great and wonderful Messiah, that He is Lord and Savior, that He is living in our lives and that He will be all of those things to those who will make Him the Cornerstone of their lives.

How can we become spiritually mature in the midst of suffering? First, we must realize our need for the Word. The Word is what excites you about life and teaches you what life is all about. Secondly, we must realize our need for a firm foundation. The man I mentioned whose life was devastated because of a foundation built on sand realized his need and stepped onto a firm foundation. Thirdly, we need to realize that we have a message of hope. Don't hold back and be silent about Jesus. Proclaim Him to people who keep tripping over Him as the only Foundation capable of holding them securely now and for eternity, for Jesus Christ is our eternal Cornerstone, and will be to all who place their faith in Him as Messiah, Lord and Savior. All who come to Him by faith will not be disappointed.