

There are times I just don't feel at home in this world. One of the hardest parts about being a Christian is that there is less and less cultural reinforcement for Christianity. Every day I read some story that reminds me that this world is opposed to what I believe. For example, the Hi-Way Tabernacle Church in Rockport was severely flooded during Hurricane Harvey. Still, the church served as a FEMA staging center, provided shelter for 70 displaced people and distributed more than 8,000 emergency meals. But the church is not eligible for any of the billions of dollars of recovery money from FEMA, because FEMA "categorically excludes houses of worship from equal access to disaster relief grants because of their religious status." Ok, separation of church and state. I get it.

Amy Barrett, a brilliant law professor at Notre Dame who clerked for Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, has been nominated by President Trump to serve on the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. But Prof. Barrett has a problem: she's a Catholic and a committed Christian. This mother of seven has a special needs child and two children adopted from Haiti. She is also a very public Christian which prompted Sen. Dianne Feinstein's comment during Barrett's confirmation hearing, "Dogma lives loudly within you." Sen. Al Franken compared her speech before a religious freedom organization to giving a speech to Pol Pot, the genocidal Cambodian dictator. Sen. Dick Durbin asked her, "Do you consider yourself an 'orthodox Catholic'?" All this despite Article VI of the Constitution, which specifically states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust in the United States."

The Handmaid's Tale recently won an Emmy for Outstanding Drama Series. This TV series is based on Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel set in "the totalitarian, Christian theonomic government of Gilead." In a postnuclear holocaust, Christian televangelists and other evangelical leaders take over the United States. Most women are left infertile by the nuclear fallout so the "Commander" and his cronies implement a reign of terror in which all fertile women are brought at gunpoint into monastery-like enclaves. Once there, the "handmaids" serve as concubines of the religious leaders who quote passages of Scripture to justify their treachery. "Blessed are the meek" declares one mother superior-type person as she zaps an uncooperative handmaid in the face with a cattle prod. The beloved Christian hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" plays in the background as the commanders impregnate a bevy of the maidens in a monthly "ceremony" to "allow the women to experience 'God's plan for all women,' the bearing of children."

How do you feel when you hear stuff like that? Shocked? Sad? Angry? Doesn't it make you long for the good old days? The only problem is – there are no "good old days." Followers of Jesus Christ have always been out of place here on earth. The book of 1 Peter makes it clear that, being a citizen of heaven, makes you an alien here on earth, with alien beliefs practicing an alien form of behavior. This is nothing new. In fact, it is laughable to compare the trials of Christians in America with those scattered in, "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." We know little about suffering for our faith. But if you are a follower of Christ you know what it is to feel like when you don't fit.

How should we respond when we just don't seem to fit in with this world? How should we live in a world where people criticize or mock things that are sacred to us. Peter says, don't get mad – get holy. Don't condemn those who reject Christ, win them over by your holy behavior. Here's why - The biggest threat to the church is not a world opposed to Christianity but a watered-down form of Christianity that has forgotten what is holy. Peter admonishes his readers to live holy lives built upon three pillars of the faith.

1. Permanent salvation...vv. 3-5. Salvation is one of the dominant themes in this letter. The certainty of our salvation provides an anchor for our souls. Can you think of anything more encouraging to the person who feels out of place than to know that God has prepared a place, a perfect place far beyond all sin and injustice and oppression and evil for those who accept the free gift of salvation? Right out of the gate in v. 2, Peter loads up on this work being God's work and not man's. Father, Spirit, Son.

Sin renders us incapable of earning God's favor but God, "according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again." Salvation is a gift of God's grace. It cannot be earned or deserved. You may be able to earn a wage or win an award but no human being merits salvation. "When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a day's pay for his time – that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy – that is a prize. When a person receives recognition for his achievements – that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award, yet receives such a gift anyway – that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor." (G. W. Knight). Salvation is your inheritance, "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." The second pillar that forms the foundation of our witness to the world is...

2. Purposeful suffering...vv. 6-9. Peter says salvation is worth suffering for. Peter, like James, sees suffering as a gift. "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!" James 1:2-3 J.B. Phillips. We can rejoice in our suffering knowing that, for the believer, it has a purpose. What is that purpose? Suffering proves the genuineness of our faith.

Genuine faith is more precious than gold Peter says. Is there anything more precious than gold? How about diamonds? A diamond is simply a chunk of coal that is refined over time and under pressure. But we live in a CZ culture. A cubic zirconium is an artificial version of the real thing. If you don't like to wait and you go to great lengths to avoid pressure you will inevitably end up with an artificial version of the real thing.

Diamond-like faith is on display in the faithful pastor who labors long in a rural setting with little prospect of numerical growth. Enduring faith is displayed by the wife who prays for her unbelieving husband for years with no visible results. The man or woman who works among an animistic tribe for years without a convert shines forth a genuine faith. Suffering and hardship test the quality of our faith.

Dr. David Livingstone was motivated to spread the Gospel in southern Africa when he heard a veteran missionary say he had seen, “the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary had ever been.” For the next 33 years (from 1840-1873) Livingstone demonstrated a faith that was refined in the fires of affliction. He once received a letter from the London Missionary Society inquiring, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you." Livingstone replied, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all."

Faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. How do you know what is genuine unless it is tested? How can you call someone a genuine friend unless they have walked with you through hard times? Suffering refines our faith.

3. Powerful Scriptures...vv. 10-12. Salvation was God's plan from eternity past. It is not a backup plan. It was revealed to the prophets that, in spite of the sorry state of the world, God would intervene to save mankind. Angels long to see the plan unfold. Neither the prophets nor the angels were able to enjoy what is ours to enjoy.

The word of God declares what is holy and what is unholy; what is clean and what is unclean. Sometimes we may not even understand why God says what He does. Why not eat from the tree in the garden? Why sacrifice my son Isaac? Why is a woman unclean twice as long after bearing a girl baby than a boy baby? “It was not enough for the Israelites to avoid eating what God declared to be unclean; they must also loathe what God called unclean. They were to adjust their desires to conform to God's desires. They were to delight in what God found delightful and to loathe what God found detestable.” (Bob Defenbaugh, “A Call To Holiness”)

So, in light of these three pillars, how should we live our lives? In vv. 13-16, Peter exhorts his readers to lead holy lives. What does it mean to be holy? For most people the word “holy” conjures up all sorts of images – religious men and women wearing long robes with faces to match. To be holy is to be somber and weird. But that is not what Peter has in mind. The word “holy” means set apart. He spends the first 12 verses explaining God's activity in our lives to make us holy - He repurposes us through salvation, refines us through suffering and reminds us through the scriptures so that we have a new identity, a new perspective and a new rule book. The rest of this letter is a description of what a holy life looks like. We are called to be different to live by different values than the values of this world. 2:1-2, 9, 13, 23.

These are such hopeful verses, verses that speak of a future grace we long for. It's hard living in exile here in Babylon. It's hard to have enthusiasm for life when there is so much injustice and hate and division. I don't think we need enthusiasm. We need parousiasm...4:7; 2 Pe. 3:10-14.

I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases 1:13-16: “So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You

didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy." 1 Peter 1:13-16 (The Message)

With our minds engaged, our thoughts sober, our lives focused and our hearts calm, we are never surprised by the hostility of men toward the message of the gospel. We know that there is a solution to this mess and we live with the confidence that one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. That's our hope and we're stickin' to it. In the meantime, let me say it again - The biggest threat to the church is not a world opposed to Christianity but a watered-down Christianity that has forgotten what it means to be holy.

Jesus can make you holy. It wouldn't be a command if it weren't possible. His blood applied to our life makes us clean... 1:2.

"Max DePree was a paramedic in World War II, and he served in Europe, and he told me a story I've never forgotten about how they would save soldiers. They would go into the field after battle, whenever they could, to try to save the soldiers that were there. Sometimes they would be wounded Allied soldiers, sometimes they would be wounded German soldiers. Max said they always carried with them units of blood for transfusion, and that blood would save lives, and the bags of blood, as part of a kind of moral deal at that time, carried the names of the donors on the bags. Whoever had given that blood back in The States, their name was on that bag, was on that blood, and so whoever got it could know whose blood had saved their life. Max said they started doing an interesting thing. This wasn't military policy, just some of the paramedics started doing that. They would save bags that had Jewish names on them for the German Nazi soldiers. Isn't that wonderful? Max said they would actually talk to them, if the guys were conscious, and they would tell them, "You know, if I don't help you, you're going to die. You're lying here wounded, you're going to die, but you can be saved. You don't have to die. I want to save you, but you will have to receive blood from a Jewish donor, if you want to stay alive," and Max said some of them would say, "Yes, please, yes, I want to live." Max said it was the most amazing thing. Sometimes they would say no. Such was the pride, the arrogance, folly, whatever it is that gets in the human heart. They would say, 'I'd rather die, than humble myself to receive life from the blood of a Jewish donor.' Max said when that happened, they would let them pass out, and then they would save them anyway. God is not willing that any should perish, but He gives to everyone a choice, the most important one that you can ever make... Who are you trusting to atone for your sin? Who are you trusting to set things right between you and God? Who are you trusting to save you?" John Ortberg

Jesus shed His blood not just so that we would live, but so that we could lead holy lives. Will you accept the blood of a Jewish man and receive life? Will you allow God to sprinkle you with the blood of Christ and through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to make you clean?