

The Saved Sojourner - Introduction to 1st Peter

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INTRODUCTION

The American Dream...Are you living it? The American Dream is believed to be the birthright of every American citizen, isn't it? We expect to be able to live it and experience it ourselves and we build that expectation into our children and show them through our own example how to pursue it with our time, energy, talents and money. What is the American Dream? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it for us. Are you ready?

Definition of *the American Dream*

: a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful. With good jobs, a nice house, two children, and plenty of money, they believed they were living *the American dream*.

That sounds good, doesn't it? What's wrong with having good jobs, a nice house, 2 children, and plenty of money? Nothing. God teaches us to work hard and there's nothing wrong with being successful and enjoying some of the benefits that come with living in America. But is this God's full dream for the people he set free from slavery through the precious blood of his own Son Jesus Christ? Is his full purpose for his sons and daughters, health, wealth and the pursuit of happiness? Are these what he teaches us to have as our primary goals in life?

And what happens when the American dream just doesn't pan out for us...when, in spite of our best efforts to work hard and be successful and make good choices...life happens. Our spouse leaves us. Our health fails. We get fired from our job by a boss who doesn't like us. A child dies. We get persecuted or mocked for our faith in Christ. We get punished for doing the right thing at work. A friend stabs us in the back. Do we lash out? Do we take legal action? Do we get mad at God? Do we fall into depression and hopelessness? Do we abandon our faith?

I'll tell you that these are highly likely reactions for anyone who's setting their hope on the American Dream and counting on it as their birthright...for anyone who's setting their hope on this broken and sinful world that's so full of suffering, hurt and pain and where the devil is prowling around looking to devour people and lead them away from God and his purposes. And I'll also tell you that we who have trusted in Christ in America struggle even more than believers in many other parts of the world with this worldly idea that God should be expected to provide us with certain comforts and "blessings," and certainly good finances and good health for us and our family members; especially if we're being faithful to him and seeking to follow him and accomplish his purposes.

But the troubling reality is that this isn't always the case, even in America. Faithful and godly people lose their jobs, get serious health problems, lose loved ones, get abandoned by their spouses, find themselves in financial trouble, and on and on. The unexpected happens. And if we open our eyes beyond America, we find that all around the world godly believers are being persecuted and martyred and losing everything for their faith in Christ. We learn of missionaries who've lost their lives or lost their spouses in their efforts to share the gospel with an unreached people group.

And if we read the Bible much, we hear of many, many heroes of the faith who in no sense achieved the American Dream:

Hebrews 11:35–38 (ESV)

35 ...Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

But you know what? These people didn't get mad at God and didn't abandon their faith. Instead they got put into the Hall of Faith in Hebrews chapter eleven. And that's because they didn't have their hope set on this world and what it can offer. And they weren't expecting God to reward them by providing them with all the material things and comforts available in the present age. Instead they were

expecting only God himself. They wanted HIM and to walk through life with him. They loved him and were set on walking with him and accomplishing his purposes by his power, wherever that might take them.

Their hope was set on God...life with him now and the glorious future that awaited them when they would one day see him face-to-face in a place so much better than anything this world could ever offer. You see, they were living as strangers and sojourners in this world...people just passing through... people from another country who were in a nation not their own temporarily, but who weren't settling in, weren't getting too comfortable, and definitely weren't trying to become like everyone else. And with this perspective, in the hard times and persecutions they endured, their faith was not destroyed, but was strengthened!

My friends, I tell you all this, because we're about to begin a journey through the book of 1 Peter. And in this study, we're going to be guided by the Apostle Peter and the Holy Spirit to dramatically shift the way we view life and what we expect out of it. And it's going to be a wonderful shift that will help prepare us for whatever comes our way in this life. We're going to learn how to endure, thrive, stay strong in our faith, and even experience joy inexpressible in the middle of the most difficult trials, testing, and suffering that can ever come our way during our brief days on this earth. We're going to learn what life is intended to look like for a *saved sojourner* whose hope is set on God and life with him in his kingdom now and into eternity.

Today I just want to introduce the book, and then give you the big picture overview of how it's laid out and where Peter is going to take us in the coming weeks and months. So let's begin with a brief introduction to the book. This is of course the first of two letters, or epistles, that Peter wrote, and this first one is addressed to followers of Christ living in 5 provinces of the Roman Empire... provinces located in the northern regions of Asia Minor, or present-day Turkey.

Most scholars agree that this letter was written by Peter in Rome around 62-63 A.D., shortly before the terrible persecutions of Christians carried out by the emperor Nero; persecutions which eventually led to Peter's own martyrdom around the time of Nero's death in 68 AD. Peter most certainly had the opportunity to practice what he shares with us in this his first letter.

According to the...historian Tacitus,...Nero burned Christians alive as torches to light his gardens at night. He killed other Christians in equally severe ways (e.g., feeding them to wild animals for public entertainment). In all, he may have murdered thousands of Rome's Christians.... (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*).

And yet history tells us that Peter lived what he preached and he went to his death faithful to his Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ...eyes fixed on his eternal home with God and the glorious inheritance awaiting him in heaven.

As you might expect, one of the central themes of 1 Peter is HOPE in the midst of great trials, testing and suffering. J. Sidlow Baxter makes an interesting observation related to Peter's emphasis on hope. He notes that the order in which the epistle writers appear in the New Testament is first Paul, then Peter, and then John. And what's interesting is that Paul is distinctively the epistle writer of *faith*...Peter's distinctive is *hope*...and John's is *love*. Faith, hope, and then love. And "this would seem also to be the usual order of progress in the spiritual experience of believers" (*Explore the Book – Volume 6*). Faith leading to enduring hope and resulting in a life of love for God and for each other. In 1 Peter we're going to learn a lot about hope...a hope that does not disappoint and that endures through the most difficult of times.

So now I want to walk you through the layout of the book and the big picture of where Peter's going to take us:

- 1:1-1:2 Greeting – *who the letter's addressed to and some key truths about God's plan for the people he's saved through Christ.*
- 1:3-1:12 The Great Salvation God Has Brought to Us
 - A. Born again to a living hope and an imperishable inheritance (1:3-6)
 - B. A salvation that brings joy even through the times of testing (1:7-9)
 - C. A salvation that prophets and angels longed to understand (1:10-12)

- 1:13-2:10 Therefore...a Big Picture View of the Saved Life
 - A. Setting your faith and hope in God (1:13-21)
 - B. Learning to love through knowing and obeying the Word (1:22-2:3)
 - C. Living with the body to proclaim God's excellencies (2:4-10)
- 2:11-4:19 Practical Guidance for Living the Saved Life
 - A. Overview: Living as a sojourner and exile (2:11-12)
 - B. Glorifying God by submitting to authority (2:13-17)
 - C. Glorifying God as a servant or slave (2:18-25)
 - D. Glorifying God as a wife (3:1-6)
 - E. Glorifying God as a husband (3:7)
 - F. Glorifying God as a unified body (3:8-12)
 - G. Glorifying God in suffering and testing (3:13-4:19)
- 5:1-5:11 God's Survival Kit for Suffering Sojourners
- 5:12-14 Farewell – "Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

So that's the big picture of where we going in this study of 1 Peter and I'm very excited about leading you through it. This book is very near and dear to my heart. It's one that I memorized when I was in my 20's and though I couldn't recite it to you now, the principles and even words from specific verses come to mind often and have had a deep impact on how I view life and challenges that come. I trust it will have as deep an impact on you as it has had on me.

I want to close today with a letter and few comments that I found in the *Holman New Testament Commentary's* introduction to 1st Peter. I share it with you to drive home one more time how desperately we need the perspective and the principles Peter shares with us in this book. Because truly there is a roaring lion seeking to devour followers of Christ, and he specializes in using difficult trials in our lives to break down our faith, make us mad at God, and lead us down the path of depression and hopelessness. There are few things he likes to do more than this. And you and I must be prepared for these attacks and lies that will come in the difficult challenges we face in life. Peter will show us how to be prepared. So listen to this letter that was written to a pastor some years ago:

Eighteen years ago the Lord blessed my wife and me with a child born with multiple birth defects. When he was born, the doctor came to me and said,

“Don’t hope, he will not live out the day.” I got on my knees and said, “God, I don’t know why you sent me this little boy with so many problems—three and one half pounds, three months premature, only a portion of a left leg, malformed right hand, possible lung damage, etc.; but please don’t take him back now.” That evening when I came to the hospital the doctor greeted me by saying, “I just examined your son again. I don’t believe it’s the same boy. I think he’s going to make it.”

My son stayed five weeks in that hospital. He came home and then for years, it was in and out of hospitals for one operation after another. Each time his little stump would grow the bone would push through the tip of his stump and would have to be sawed off. Seeing the pain that boy went through, I thought I was going insane. I cursed God and turned my back on him. I crawled into a bourbon bottle for fifteen years. The more I drank, the deeper into hell I went. Sometimes, waking up hungover, I would be confronted with horrible things I had done that I didn’t even remember doing. One morning I awoke with a broken right hand and discovered twenty-two holes in my wall that I had punched. I didn’t remember doing it.

One Sunday morning I laid in bed and reflected on what a lousy husband and father I was and decided I would take one of my shotguns and stick it in my mouth and pull the trigger. The radio was on, and you were speaking. I had never heard you before. You said that Jesus loved me. It had no impact because I had heard it all before. Only then you said, “THE LORD DEALS IN FUTURES.” I don’t know, to this day, why that phrase hit me like a ton of bricks. It saved my life. I started crying and said, “God, if you deal in futures, then take this wretched life and make something of it before I give it to Satan.”

Of course, God answered. And my boy? In the eighth grade he was third on the east coast in a math competition and received a certificate from our governor and a mini scholarship from John Hopkins University in Baltimore. In his freshman year of high school, he was the number one world geography student in the nation. Today he is a junior in high school and continues to astound us with his brilliance. My lovely wife stayed with me through all the hell I put her through. When I asked her why, she just said, “The Lord deals in futures, and so do I.”

If anyone in the world could identify with the Lord who deals in futures, it would be the apostle Peter. Everyone remembers Peter. What we remember most vividly about him is his denial of Jesus Christ. Mention the name Peter, and even those who don't know much about the Bible seem to be able to recall a rooster and a guy named Peter who swore he didn't know who Jesus was. That same Peter—the one who struck out badly, who didn't get to home plate, let alone limp around the bases, the one person everybody figured was all washed up—that Peter spent the bulk of his adult life speaking for Christ. Some thirty years later and thousands of miles after warranty, Peter sat down in Rome and wrote this letter. If anybody understood that the Lord deals in futures, it was Peter (*Holman New Testament Commentary*).

And who better to guide us to live the life of Saved Sojourner...a child of God whose hope is fixed not on this present world and the American Dream, but on life with God now in preparation for a wonderful future reigning with him in the glorious place he's preparing for us right now? Who better than Peter to guide us to endurance and patience with joy no matter what life brings our way? May God's Spirit teach us as we dig deep in the coming weeks and months into this treasure box of *wisdom from God* shared with us through the Apostle Peter.