

## 1 Peter 4:1-12

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I want you to imagine a wealthy family who had to flee an African country spiralling into chaos and civil war. Their little daughter grows up in the UK longing to return. Though she was five when she left she has vivid happy memories of the house and village she was born in. She remembers the warm African sun and the cool marble floors of her house. She remembers the spicy rich smells of the kitchen where she would play at the feet of the cook. She remembers running through the village with her little friends. She remembers walking in the hills behind the village picking cyclamen. She wants to go back.

Her father remonstrates with her. "Aren't we happy here? We have a good life. We are together as a family. We are privileged people. God has given us money and security and one another. Isn't that enough?"

But it is not. Every night when her mother or father tuck her up in bed and they settle to pray she says "Can we pray that we can go home?" And she resents her father for bringing her to this cold crowded country.

After several years her parents decide on a course of action. They decide as a teenager she is old enough to see a video, made by a family friend, of the village they left. As the camera approaches the village it is almost unrecognisable. The empty houses look like scattered carcasses with gaping wounds and exposed skeletons. Her own home lies fallen with a breached perimeter wall and rubble where once flowers grew. No children laugh in the street. No vendors cry out. A dog wanders aimlessly through the ruins. Out on the edge of the village is a large mound of earth. There is no memorial stone, no wreaths of flowers adorn it, but everyone knew what it was; a silent testimony to the deadly fruit of war.

In a sense Peter, in this letter, is dealing with the same problem that that girls parents were dealing with. He has been reminding his Christian readers that when they became Christians they too found themselves living as exiles. But in their case they hadn't moved location they had changed their identity stayed in the same place – they had ceased to be people of the world, and become the people of God. So that now Christians find themselves living in the place they once fully called home – but they are not at home. We are exiles, we are scattered, we are foreigners because we belong to another place.

The discomfort of that makes every Christian at one point or another long to be back, thoroughly at home, settled in this world.

Peter has been trying to help us to live that "not quite at home" lifestyle. He spoke about the joy our future hope – in which one day we will be fully at home in the new heaven and the new earth. He spoke of the disciplines of living as foreigners. He spoke about our privilege as exiles – we are a

chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession

He has spoken about living lives which commend the gospel at work, in the family and in our church life together. And he has spoken most poignantly of being prepared to suffer, as foreigners, as exiles, who will be misunderstood and opposed, just as Jesus was.

And understandably sometimes we just want to go back – to thoroughly fit in as we once did. Our privileges as Christians help a bit but we need more.

In the first 11 verses of 1 Peter there is a sense in which Peter is doing what those parents did for that little girl. It is painful and yet perhaps necessary if we are to be reconciled to this life as strangers and aliens. He will point us in verses 1-6 to the reality of this world, and then in verses 7-11 to the imminence of its end.

➤ *The reality of this world - 4:1-6*

The key thought that we need to unpack is found in verses 1-2.

📖 **1 Peter 4:1-2**

“whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.”

Some commentators argue that that is rubbish. Suffering is much more often the *occasion* of sin and turning away from God. I have seen it dozens of times – personal tragedy can turn people into bitter God-haters. The Bible is aware of that.

But it is not always so, nor indeed mainly so for Christians. Suffering for Christians, again and again, focuses the mind on ultimate reality like nothing else. C.S. Lewis memorably called it “God’s megaphone to a dying world.” It shouts at us about the decay and misery and mortality of this world. It weans us off a naïve childish attachment to this world.

I could give you so many examples. I noticed for instance that the next Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby was profoundly shaped by the tragic death of his daughter in a car accident. It influenced him to switch from a job in the oil industry to church leadership.

Almost every pastor can tell you about a turbulent difficult grumpy church member who after some experience of suffering has become a new character. My own experience of coming to faith was associated in part to my eyes being opened to the reality of suffering in this world. I have seen people come to faith through failed relationships, financial disasters, family breakdowns, illness, and the funereal drum beat of vanishing dreams. Were they clutching at straws? No! Their eyes were being forced open to see how paper thin is the façade of this world’s promises.

No one who has truly known the reality of suffering will be a starry eyed optimist about this world. They will either be a resigned pessimist, or they will seek another world.

📖 **1 Pet 4:2**

Peter then lists the “evil human desires” that we will be liberated from.

📖 **1 Pet 4:3**

There is a massive overlap in meaning between these words. They mostly have the sense of indulging human appetites. The appetites themselves are not forbidden. He mentions lust, but we must remember that sexual love is celebrated in the bible. He mentions drunkenness - but wine which gladdens the heart is good gift from God in Psalm 104. He mentions orgies and carousing which is about unrestrained partying, but we must remember that Jesus first revealed his glory according to the gospel of John by turning water into wine at a wedding party.

It is not the appetite for love, sex, food and wine, fun and parties is wrong in itself. It is just if we make those appetites absolute in our lives, they morph into something dark and destructive – erotic intimacy becomes a lonely addiction to porn, a joyful glass of

shiraz becomes liver cirrhosis, happy Christmas parties become the source of post-Christmas shame and regret.

And underneath it all lies the last of Peter's vices – "detestable idolatry." Perhaps Peter did have in mind the idea of people going to worship in pagan temples but the bible makes it plain that idolatry is much broader and deeper than that. Greed is idolatry according to the apostle Paul. Whatever we imagine will bring us ultimate happiness is our god. And if it is not the true and living God it is an idol.

What do young people fill their minds with on TV? They are constructing their lifetime understanding of what will make them happy. They admire the cribs of the stars. They watch the latest music videos, either imagining themselves as the glittering celebrity or having them as their partner. They admire sharp young adults who always turn their broken world into a joke. They imagine themselves in suits, or white coats, or as geeks with amazingly pretty female friends, and they dream.

Those things are our idols – they promise to fully satisfy us but they are illusions. One of the richest men in Britain is Nicholas Van Hoogstraten. He is famous as a modern day Scrooge figure, but he is wealthy, he has up to four girlfriends on the go at any one time and he lives in a mansion. In one documentary about him he observed after successfully completing a deal.

I don't feel happy at the completion. There is more pleasure in the journey than the destination.

That is what all of us are doing as we chase our idols. We know instinctively that they will not bring us happiness but while we are chasing them we can dream. We must wake up. We must sit down and watch the video that that girl watched, and see our childish naivety for what it is. Her imagination was filled with the happy things of that life, but her parents knew that they left because the tanks were rolling up the valley.

And if you are a Christian here this morning you must see that God rescued you from a world full of idols that promised much but over time will deliver only death.

So don't long to go back to that world. I know it is hard to live differently while everyone else is trying to persuade themselves that they are "living the dream."

 **1 Peter 4:4**

But they are living a lie. A lie which will start to fall apart in this life, and will be totally exposed in the next.

 **1 Peter 4:5**

So let me appeal to you, let those harsh realities purify you.

Perhaps you have had an unsatisfactory relationship. Don't just chase the next one – seek contentment as you are, learn to acquire a partner in a godly way. Find your satisfaction in Christ.

Perhaps you have experienced failure. Don't just redouble your efforts to chase success. Find contentment in being totally loved by God.

Perhaps you are experiencing middle aged disappointment with life. Don't indulge in childish dreams about some alternative life. Those who put all their hopes in this life are destined for disappointment full stop. Your particular disappointment is just a specific example of a universal principle. Put your hope in God. Find your contentment in the secure unbreakable relationship that Christ has forged for you by dying on the cross for

your sins. Find present happiness in the fact that God has given you a beautiful role in this life – to glorify him in a world of decaying dreams.

Perhaps you have experienced illness, or are facing the reality of your mortality. Don't simply fight it, as if your only hope rests in being well and not dying. There are few more sad things than hearing, as for instance I heard that death of the atheistic journalist Christopher Hitchens, that "he fought his illness to the end."

There is a kind of heroism about it as there was in Custer's last stand, or the band playing on the deck of that Titanic but that kind of death is always a heroic failure. But Christians have something more. It is the moment when the final false hope of our world is stripped away and our true hope can shine the brightest. Cultivate that and your declining years will not be a slide towards oblivion, but the culmination of a life lived for the joy of knowing Christ.

The tanks were always rolling up the valley on your earthly life. But your heavenly father has rescued you, and brought you into a new place, and given you a sure and certain hope. Don't long for a childish dream. See the reality of this world.

Whoever suffers in the body is done with sin

Here is the reality of this world then. But then he focuses on the imminence of the next.

➤ *The imminence of the next - 4:7-11*

 **1 Peter 4:7a**

Life is momentary. The Bible teaches that Jesus could return at any time, and that he certainly will at one time. But even if we do not see it we still face our own personal "end of all things" and you can never guarantee it is "far." All our children have known a peer who died. And even if you live three score and ten years the end will race towards you.

Peter says, let the shadow of the end - or perhaps better - the beautiful glory of the end, shape your life now.

Let it shape how you think.

 **1 Peter 4:7b**

Just think properly about this world. Don't get taken in by the lies that get shoved down our throats.

Let it shape how you relate.

 **1 Peter 4:8**

Let it shape particularly how you relate to the stranger.

 **1 Peter 4:9**

The translation "show hospitality to one another" conjures up a western bourgeois image of inviting our friends to dinner parties. It is literally "love strangers." By all means invite your friends to dinner but that has nothing to do with this verse. It is about reaching out here to the people we do not know – and loving them. It is about going out into the world and loving those who are different. Oxford is full of them. There is an eternity to feast with your friends but there is just a short while to love strangers.

And let it shape how you serve.

 **1 Peter 4:10**

God did something amazing when he made you. He shaped you to be useful in his world. He gave you, not only life, but gifts, for a purpose. “To serve others.” Those gifts are not yours by rights, but his bestowal and you are called to steward them for his glory.

Some has the gift of speaking.

 **1 Peter 4:11a**

It seems that he means teaching in church particularly since he talks about “the very words of God.” If you have a gift of teaching you have an obligation as a faithful steward to cultivate it and use it for God’s glory. We have our Spurgeons group to develop such gifts. Don’t waste your gift.

 **1 Peter 4:11b**

All gifts of service are God’s good gifts to his church through you. Whether it is setting up chairs, doing the PA, visiting the sick, leading a homegroup, standing in for Kate Blanche’s maternity leave, being an elder, or preaching at the front. And of course, though I think Peter is focusing on service within the church here – since he uses “one another” in vv8 and 9, God gave you gifts to serve him in the world just as much.

Life is short. The end of all things is near. You have one life. Do not spend your time labouring for things that will perish, hankering after false dreams.

At the end of the video that African girl turned to her parents with tears in her eyes. I’m sorry I complained Dad. Thank you for rescuing me from that. The next day she opened her eyes with a new thought in her heart. She didn’t want to go back. She wanted to live the life her amazing Dad had brought her into.