

First Peter No. 5 "The Meaning of History"

1 Peter 1:10-12

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Text Comment

- v.10 “Prophets” certainly refers to the biblical prophets and especially those who wrote of the future, as most of them did to some degree. But the term extends to the entire Scripture and its doctrine of the future, at least all the Scripture that had been written prior to Peter’s writing. David is called a prophet in the NT and the psalms are cited as containing prophecy. So does the Law of Moses. Really, “the prophets” would include the entire written Scripture.
- v.11 The NT never hesitates to speak of Christ as already active in the OT, that is, of God the Son being the person of the Godhead with which Israel had chiefly to do in her history and in salvation. It is even willing to identify God the Son in his pre-incarnate activity, before he became a man and entered the world, as the man “Jesus” or as “Christ,” the names he would have later as a man. The NT reminds us that it was God the Son, the Lord Christ, who delivered his people from bondage in Egypt, gave the law at Sinai, provided for Israel in the wilderness, whose glory Isaiah saw in the temple, etc. Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever!

But, what no Jew, even the pious, believing kind, such as Peter and his fellows among the Twelve, was expecting was that the Messiah would suffer. Clearly as that may have been taught by the prophets – think of Isaiah 53 – it seemed counter-intuitive to them. The Messiah would be a king who would rule in triumph not tragedy! So it was that when Jesus first announced that he would be executed in Jerusalem, Peter *rebuked* him! So it was that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus considered it obvious that Jesus had failed and perhaps was not, therefore, the Messiah *because he had suffered and died*. [Clowney, 55-56]

“...sufferings...and glories to follow” One of the most interesting features of OT prophecy is just its tendency to see the future in one large vision and not, necessarily, to see the sequence of events, of one thing happening perhaps many years or even centuries after another. The classic illustration of this phenomenon is the appearance of a mountain range from a great distance. One sees the peaks as a great wall of mountains. What one cannot see until getting much closer is that some of those peaks are many miles closer than others and that great valleys separate them, that, in fact, what appeared to be one range of peaks is separate ranges one behind the other. Such is the Bible’s prophecy of the future, often described as a single event when, in fact, it is a complex event that takes place over time.

- v.12 It appears that Peter had not been the one who had evangelized these people; others had. The prophets, like generations of believers who would follow them, were anxious to know *when* their prophesies would be fulfilled. But they were not told, any more than we have

been told when the Second Coming will occur. But they did realize that future generations of believers would read their words and see their fulfillment. Jesus, remember, said, “Blessed are your eyes and your ears... For truly...many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” [Matt. 13:16-17]

This is an extraordinarily interesting and important text. In some ways, it is especially a text for our times. Book after book, by Christian and non-Christian alike, has in recent years explored the way modern people have come to think about life and about their lives. All these books demonstrate, with varying degrees of accuracy, the way in which our culture’s view of life, of the meaning of individual existence, and of the nature of the human person has been profoundly altered by the loss of two things: an abiding sense of the essentially moral character of life and the sense of life as part of a larger story, a transcendent history. People today do not see their lives as part of the history of the world that has moral meaning and is proceeding to a definite conclusion and fulfillment at the day when God will judge each and every human life. That vision of human life is uniquely Christian and the waning of Christian influence in the west in our time has attenuated that worldview among the inhabitants of Europe and North America.

Nowadays, for the generality of people and for all too many Christians to a lesser degree, the moral understanding of life has become increasingly indistinct. It has been replaced by a therapeutic understanding that looks not first for what is right and wrong, does not base its understanding of life first and foremost on the existence of a divine lawgiver, a holy judge, who will call all men to account for their deeds. In this new view, one thinks rather of what is helpful to people in the present, what will enable them to think better of themselves, to enjoy their lives more, and to fulfill themselves in those ways that are most popular in our time. Even in the church the prospect of divine judgment does not loom over God’s people in any persuasive way and so people do not speak of or think about “fearing the Lord” in the way in which the Bible describes that fear as an essential component of true holiness of life and a living faith in Christ. The Christian vision was always actually deeply helpful, therapeutic if you will, more helpful than the modern therapeutic vision has proved to be, but always in a secondary way. First, we must face the truth, however fearful, however unwelcome; only then can the truth help us onward in our lives.

American Christians still believe in God and pray to him and trust him and love him, but the God they have in mind is much less the transcendent and holy other God of the Scriptures, the God whom no man has seen or can see, the God who inhabits eternity and dwells in unapproachable light, the God who will by no means clear the guilty, and so the God who is prepared to judge the world and condemn those still in their sins. He is much more, in our day, the immanent and kindly God, “the therapeutic god who exists to help us with our problems.” As such his holiness and the prospect of his judgment have receded into the distant background and no longer determine life’s meaning even for Christian people. *That makes an immense difference.* People still believe in salvation, but if you probe, if you observe, if you examine, it has become a secular salvation – present relief from problems – and its priests are the various experts – including Christian pastors and preachers – who tell us in one way or another how to be happy, healthy, and prosperous and the advertisers who teach us what it takes to live the good life. You find nothing of this in the Bible; indeed, you find something dramatically different.

What is more, the present is so powerful in our day that it virtually overwhelms serious thought about the ultimate meaning of life. We live, in an unprecedented way, under the tyranny of the present and its distractions. We live amid noise, from the radio or television or from the ear buds attached to our cellphones, at home, at work, and in the car. We have news constantly of events everywhere, both small and great. We are bombarded by messages every day from advertisers. We think of our lives, without even realizing what we are doing, in terms of today's sports events, today's products, today's politics, or today's celebrities. We remain largely indifferent to the fact that all of this will be forgotten tomorrow. *It really is amazing: we're already past the outrage in Las Vegas; we've moved on. Something else is occupying our time and attention.* 24/7 news coverage of one event becomes 24/7 coverage of another the next day. We can, via TV and movies, much more easily than was the case with previous generations share the experiences of other people (however imaginary), even fill up our lives with what other people are doing and feeling, or, at least, appear to be doing and feeling. So much of the present world we live in is make-believe but we rarely take notice. We rarely think seriously about one thing or another, ponder truth at any depth, because we are constantly distracted by a barrage of the inconsequential. We are so consumed by the unrelenting intrusion of the present moment, that there is very little time and still less reason to think about the connection of our lives with anything larger, more transcendent than this particular moment as it hurtles by.

The cost of this has been great and is likely to get greater. Anyone can see that. Unbelievers are talking about it as much as believers are. The culture and its institutions are sick and dying. Transcendent purpose and meaning is invisible in American public life. We have only the vaguest idea as to why we as a people should do one thing or another. You don't have to be a Christian to see that. But, you have to be a Christian to see the true character of this loss and the reason for it: the falsehood of this life we are living in the modern west, how inauthentic and dishonest it is, how genuinely silly, and how bound to lead to ruin.

Peter reveals the nature of our problem in these three verses. He makes two points and each of them is a fundamental repudiation of our culture's philosophy of life and human existence, or, as we might put it, each of them is a complete rejection of our culture's understanding of the meaning of history.

I. First, Peter says, the great story of this world, the meaning of human history, is Jesus Christ.

What was it that the prophets, those who spoke for God and who communicated the truth of God to the world, what was it that they sought to know? What was the essential subject of the teaching that God had given them to give to us? What for them held the key to everything else? "The sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." In Christ we find the pattern that Peter has already told us is the pattern of life for his followers also: a life of faith on trial followed by unfading and imperishable glory in the world to come. He suffered in order that he might be glorified and we might be glorified with him.

Now we know what the "sufferings" were. Peter is speaking of the humiliation of Jesus Christ, his rejection by his own people, the hatred, opposition, and rejection he faced, but still, much more, all

that he suffered when he bore in his own body the punishment of the sins of his people, culminating as those punishments did on the cross. “By his stripes we are healed.”

But what are the glories? We might have thought first of the Lord's resurrection from the dead on the third day and then of his ascension to the Right Hand. No doubt Peter would say he did not mean to exclude those wonderful things. But it is clear in the letter that he is thinking especially of the Lord's future return in triumph to this world, to the second-coming. He mentions this specifically in v. 13, he speaks of it again in 4:13 in a statement very like the one we have here in 1:11, and, in fact, the entire letter is shot through with the Christian's hope of eventual glory when Christ comes again.

It may be, as I said earlier, that the OT prophets did not know how much time would separate the Lord's sufferings from the full manifestation of his glory in the world, but they saw the future in these terms, and these terms only: the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. *That is the meaning of history!* Indeed, in the similar statement in 4:13, Peter makes the history of Christ the pattern for the history of every Christian: “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” This is the scheme of history; that is its pattern, that is where it is going, where everything is headed: the revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ. What makes that so infinitely significant is the fact that *Christ already visited this world once before and when he was here, the Son of God suffered for the sins of the world.*

Did you notice what Peter *did not say*. He didn't say that the prophets were preoccupied with the advance of technology. They weren't looking for the appearance of refrigeration, or air travel, or radio, television, or the computer, or the invention of antibiotics. He didn't say that the prophets were keen to foretell the eventual appearance of democratic government, or the end of poverty, or the abolition of war. None of this remotely compares in importance to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow precisely because freedom, health, achievement, and prosperity in this world are worthless, worse than worthless, if one misses the glories that follow. Better off to be blind, deaf and dumb, and abjectly poor your entire life in this world if only you experience the glories that follow. All such worldly things, however wonderful in themselves, come and go and, in truth, hardly matter at all in the larger scheme of things. Not even the rise and fall of nations. The Soviet Union has come and gone. That seemed highly significant to us at the time and, of course, it was significant in its own way. But the cold war has been replaced by an entirely new set of problems. Man's history of hate and political failure marches on undeterred. Empires have risen and fallen throughout human history and they will rise and fall again, *and the meaning of human history will be the same after as it was before.* Should the present dust-up with North Korea lead to some cataclysmic war, God forbid, *nothing* will have changed so far as the meaning and destiny of human life is concerned. History will still be making its inexorable march to one terminus, that consummation which has loomed above the human story from its beginning, the second coming of Jesus Christ and the revelation of his divine glory to mankind.

I remember reading Paul Johnson's interesting book, *A History of the American People* some years ago. Paul Johnson, by and large, is an interesting and informative writer. I often find myself agreeing with him when he disagrees with the conventional opinion as he often does. Johnson is even a Christian of some kind, a Roman Catholic who takes his faith with some seriousness. He is

not a guide theologically or spiritually, but he has imbibed some Christian perspective that he applies to his interpretation of human life and history. But I almost gagged on the opening sentences of his history of the United States.

“The creation of the United States of America is the greatest of all human adventures. No other national story holds such tremendous lessons, for the American people themselves and for the rest of mankind. It now spans four centuries and, as we enter the new millennium, we need to retell it, for if we can learn these lessons and build upon them, the whole of humanity will benefit in the new age which is now opening.” [3]

He speaks of us Americans, “thrown together by fate in that swirling maelstrom of history” as “the most remarkable people the world has ever seen.” Well, I doubt that. I can think of others more remarkable by far: for example, the Jews and the Christians. And now, some years into the 21st century, when even Americans themselves are beginning to despair that their great experiment is coming to grief, when our institutions seem no longer capable of coping with our collapsing civilization, and when our chief exports to the rest of the world are the poisons of our popular culture – our movies, TV shows, our chic clothing, our sexual adventurism, our naked materialism and naturalism – it takes a great deal of faith to believe that the world of the 21st century is going to be a more happy, fruitful, and peaceful century because of what the United States will contribute to it. When I was a boy we were taught and we believed that America’s political institutions were the hope of the world. *No one believes that anymore and for good reason.* We are a people divided, an ascendant individualism eats away at our unity like an acid, we are addicted to borrowed money, an all-encompassing mediocrity is the defining characteristic of our political class, pornography and the video game are the characteristic pleasures of our time, the American academy has become an engine of social and ethical confusion and alienation rather than of ethical formation, and on and on. Where is real hope for the future to be found in any of that?

But then America is but one of a great many moments in the history of mankind, one more political development that has waxed and now has begun to wane and, if the Lord tarries, if he does not return for centuries yet, there will be many more such empires rise and fall when America is forgotten. And so the world turns as it always has before. This nation, these political realities, these technological developments that can seem so epoch-making to us, are not the meaning of history, nor are they in any sense the answer to the question of history. That lies in a completely different realm: the sufferings of Christ years ago and his return to earth in glory sometime in the future. Everything else is meaningful *only* in relation to his personal history and to its meaning for human beings. Nothing else can save a man, nothing else can give his life authentic meaning, nothing else can satisfy his or her craving for life that is truly life, and nothing else can give meaning to the march of events in the world. *We are always concentrating on things that are of secondary or tertiary importance while neglecting the very things that are the great purpose for which God made the world and gave each of us life.*

Therefore, the only wise man or woman is the one who thinks about all that he sees and all that she hears and all that he or she does in terms of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow in due time. This world and all that is in it is passing away. But the word of the Lord endures

forever. *I know very well how this word rebukes me! Does it do the same to you?*

We Christians, like all other people, think far too much about what matters scarcely at all and far too little about the things that matter for time and eternity. Far too rarely do we think of what we confront in our lives in terms of *what Christ has done and what he will do*. How little we live our lives strictly and gladly in terms of those two defining moments in history: his sufferings and his future glory! What does this mean in view of the cross of Jesus Christ? What should I think about this or do about that in view of the coming revelation of the glory of Christ? But, don't you see, we waste every moment of our time, *throw it away*, that is not spent with our eyes open to those two events, which are the meaning and explanation and purpose of everything! Now I don't mean that our minds are not to be thinking of anything else. Of course we must pay attention to the road when we are driving, to the stove when we are cooking, to the teacher when we are taking notes in class, to our responsibilities when we are at work, and so on. *What I am talking about is what is to be the fundamental perspective of our mental life, a perspective that asserts itself again and again every day*. I must hurry on.

II. In the second place, Peter says, the true significance of the history of the world is salvation, the individual's forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and hope of everlasting life.

The reason there is such a thing as a human being, made in the image of God, is because there is such a thing as salvation and eternal life. The fact that there is salvation and that there is, conversely, the possibility of missing this salvation and falling under divine judgment instead, *is the whole significance of human existence, of the life of the world, of the march of human events, and of the life of every individual human being*.

This too is a conviction, a life perspective that, however dim before, has virtually disappeared from public view in our culture. That the world exists as the venue for the great story of personal salvation, that everything else finds its importance in the role it plays in the moral history of human beings is a philosophy of life now wholly alien to the mind of modern man, however clearly it is the viewpoint of Holy Scripture. What gives man his surpassing value is precisely that he is the object of the *moral* interest of the living God. "Look at the birds of the air...are you not of much more value than they?" Jesus asked. Why is man so much more valuable? Because he is made for the knowledge of God, for fellowship with God, and so for eternal life, and because his life is measured in the scales of the divine justice.

What else did Jesus mean when he said, "For what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-37) Our culture no longer really pays any attention to the reality that makes that statement meaningful: *the fundamentally moral nature of human life, lived as it is in the presence and before the view of a Holy God who is our Maker, the reality of man in actual relationship with this God, of a coming judgment, of eternity in heaven or hell, bliss or damnation*. It no longer sees human beings as set apart by the supernatural element within them, the eternal soul that every human being has whatever his or her condition of life. Neither in Washington, nor in Silicon Valley, nor in Hollywood will you find this vision of human life. And what a difference *that* makes!

The Marxists in days not long gone by would have gladly sacrificed, and did in fact sacrifice, millions of lives to gain the whole world. Millions paid the price but the world was not gained. In the West we have sacrificed millions of unborn children, we have surrendered our souls to the pursuit of personal peace and affluence, but once again the world is slipping through our fingers. Why? Because that isn't what this world or life in this world is actually all about. Human beings are eternal beings, beings made for relationship with God, beings to be judged and to be treated forever in terms of the life they lived before God, in either faithful submission or defiant rebellion. *Salvation is the great thing; really it is the only thing. Everything else, when put beside it – health, wealth, happiness, success – is a trifle.* The world was meant to turn on the axis of personal salvation.

And the proof of that, Peter says, is that *the angels themselves think so*. That is an interesting word that Peter uses in v. 12, the last sentence. “Even angels long to *look into* these things. It is the same word we find in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. People came to the garden that Easter morning and stooped down *to peer* into the empty tomb. That is the idea, the image, here. Angels peering down with studied gaze, longing to know more of this great salvation. There was no salvation for them. The angels that fell were damned. Those that did not were established forever in fellowship with God. That was all. But, for elect men and women – in so many ways lower beings than the mighty angels – God shows them this extraordinary love and grace and mercy; there was for them this titanic achievement on the part of Jesus Christ, his terrible suffering and death to remove their guilt and sin – imagine how amazing for the angels to see their Creator hanging on a cross for pipsqueak human beings –, what is more, there is the present work of the Holy Spirit, and there is the promise of a stupendous consummation of salvation when Jesus returns to earth, and meantime there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents. The consummation of salvation – apparently the angels don't know much more about the second coming than we do – I say, the consummation of salvation *is utterly captivating to them*. They have the clarity of thought, the lack of distraction sufficient to realize that *this* is the really remarkable thing about human life!

Angels know about nations; they have to do with their rise and fall. We read that in Daniel. They know about the rise and fall of political fortunes – from ancient Persia to the present day – they know about the life of the world. Our technology doesn't amaze them. They can do all that we can do without the help of our sophisticated machines! *But, your salvation; this is what takes their breath away!* This is what the most powerful beings in the universe, short of God himself, think about and speak about to one another: our salvation; it's extraordinary to them.

Hollywood imagines that angelic beings would be taken up with what Hollywood is taken up with: romance, sensual pleasures, perhaps doing good deeds to people in crises to make them happy again. Think *It's a Wonderful Life*. But all of this is small potatoes to what fascinates and preoccupies the angels that actually exist. It is salvation, eternal peace with God through the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ that moves and stirs the angels in heaven. In Wesley's lines:

Angels in fix'd amazement
Around our altars hover,
with eager gaze

adore the grace
Of our eternal Lover.

What we find in these few verses is a summons to think about our lives in a dramatically different way than the world around us. It used to be said, “When vice prevails...the post of honor is a private station.” But it could just as well be said that when a culture has built itself and its way of life on the denial of the most fundamental truth, it is the Christian’s calling to be an outsider! Christians must more and more reject what is customary – in the way they spend their time and money, the importance they attach to things, the way they entertain themselves, the way they think about and use technology, the way they relate to other people, the way they live their lives in every way. You cannot fear God and live as this culture lives, because its way of life is founded on its repudiation of the fear of God. You cannot work out your salvation in fear and trembling as the one great thing you have to do in life and at the same time remain at peace with and follow the lead of a culture that has been constructed on the denial that there is such a thing as an eternal salvation or such a thing as eternal damnation. You must be very different! The sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow must make you very different. Why? Because the Lord Christ did suffer and his glories are one day to be revealed to mankind.

At point after point every day, whether it is your use of your computer, or your reading of an ad, or your decision about a TV show, or the importance you attach to a news story, or the way in which you relate to a neighbor, or your own children, or the choice you make about how to spend your time or money, or the way you think about the problems you face or your hopes for the future – it comes down to this: everything is really meaningful, everything is really important *only* in its relation to the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow; nothing can be good or right except in proper relation to the salvation that God offers the world in Jesus Christ, that salvation the angels think is the truly extraordinary thing about human existence.

Whether your personal struggles, whatever they may be: ask what they mean in relation to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that follow; whether the political or social situation: how should I think of it given the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow; whether my relationship with a workmate, a friend, a neighbor, a spouse, a child, a parent: how is that relationship to be shaped by the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow; whether my own sins and moral struggles: how am I to be galvanized, inspired, and instructed by the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. To live every day asking and answering such questions is to live an authentic Christian life, in fact it is to live a genuine and authentic *human* life, because only such a life is not actually built on a lie, but is built on the absolute truth!