

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

1 Peter 1:13–2:3

Dr. George O. Wood

1 Peter 1:13–2:3 (NIV)

“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’ Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

Remember we have introduced this series in Peter by saying that Peter is giving help for struggling Christians. First Peter 4:12 tells us that the persons to whom Peter is writing are suffering a painful or a fiery trial. Peter is giving counsel to those who are going through trial. Thus far, in the opening twelve verses of the letter, he has pointed to our privilege rather than our persecution. To our possessions in Christ, rather than our pain. That's good therapy for persons who are suffering, to have a reminder first as to who we really are and what our salvation involves.

Today's passage involves five therapies for developing spiritual strength. The reason I've selected five therapies is because Peter, writing in the Greek language, has five imperatives or five commands in this passage. The English doesn't exactly convey the precision of the language that's being employed. The five imperatives are verse 13, "Set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you when Christ is revealed"; verse 14, "Become holy in all that you do"; verse 17, "Live your lives here as strangers in reverent fear"; verse 22, "Love one another deeply"; and verse 2 of chapter 2, "Crave pure spiritual milk."

For a person that is struggling and identifying with pain and loneliness and anxiety and heartbreak, I can't think of any more valuable therapy to give than these five.

I. Set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you.

The first of which is hope. "Therefore prepare your minds for action. Be self controlled, set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:13).

Everything may be stripped away from a Christian, as what's happening with Peter's recipients of the letter. But one thing can never be stripped from the Christian, and that is hope. All we have to do is compare the hope we have as Christians with the hopelessness in the world to get a measure of the importance of the word "hope."

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

Jean Paul Sartre, perhaps more than any other person in the twentieth century, projected to us a vision of what it is like to live without hope in the play *No Exit*, as a kind of blankness. Life is described in terms of the imagery of hell. Only hell, for Sartre, is not fire and brimstone or where the devil tortures. Hell is other people and hell is this life.

In the opening scene one of the three lead players is ushered into a room, decorated in an old way, by a valet. It is one room among thousands in a kind of hell hotel. There are no mirrors, no windows, nothing breakable. A light burns continually. Thinking he is in hell, he expects torturers to quickly move in on him, and he is surprised when two women are ushered in and their past begins to come out. For Sartre these are the kind of people that populate the hell of this life.

The recognition slowly begins to dawn on them that the room is their eternal abode. One says, "We're in hell and no one can come here. We'll stay in this room together, the three of us for ever and ever." They have been placed in the room to be one another's torturers. No outside torturers are to arrive. They are one another's psychological torturers.

For Sartre that is life, because the people we've been placed with we didn't have a choice to be with, and it turns out that we wind up destroying one another with our words, with our body actions, with our tasks, with our meaninglessness. We torment one another throughout our lifetime. Sartre is saying there is no exit to the human predicament. Hell is but the lengthening of this life. The world is a room, the room is hell, the people of this world are the citizens of hell. There is no exit. There are no doors. There are no windows. There are no mirrors.

If, in the Bible, hell is the one place where human hope is gone, then, for Sartre, life is the one place where human hope is gone.

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

In contrast to this hopelessness that is in the world, Peter reminds us when we get ourselves in shut-in situations and think there is no exit, think there are no windows and no doors, he reminds us that we are not shut up. But we have a hope. And we should be reminded that Jesus is the carpenter and He makes excellent doors and windows!

Peter literally says in this passage, “Therefore.” And the word “therefore” is the turning point word. It means in light of all that’s been shared thus far in the first twelve verses about salvation. “Therefore having girded up your mind” (verse 13). And the word “girded up” or “prepared your mind for action” involved the idea of a person’s loosely flowing robe. Taking the girdle or the sash or the belt and cinching it up. Peter is saying, “Cinching up the belt of your mind.” Or cinching up your trousers or rolling up your sleeves. Or, when you’re in a difficult situation, don’t let your mind get into neutral but get it in biblical gear. Hitching up your mind and being sober, which is the exact opposite of being drunk or out of your senses or being lost in self-pity about your situation or turning to alcohol or turning to drugs or turning to any one of the kinds of release that might be a sinful sort of release. Instead, be sober and perfectly or completely gird your hope or settle your hope in the grace that’s being brought to you at the revelation or coming of Jesus Christ.

There are some situations that are so hopeless that there is no other hope. Things aren’t going to get better. The only thing that’s going to get better is Jesus Christ is going to come. I don’t know if that is the hopelessness of your situation, but whenever other hope is dim—when health hope is dim, when financial hope is dim, when friendship hope is dim, when marriage hope is dim—when all other hopes have died, this hope has not. The revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven. Hope. That’s the word that Peter holds out as the first therapy when we’re hard pressed.

II. Do not conform to the evil desires you had.

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

The second word that he holds out is the word “holy.” “As obedient children [or “children of obedience,” that is, the characteristic of our lifestyle is that we seek to walk in obedience], do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” (verse 14, NIV). There are many people who think of holiness as something awful. Some people think holiness is kind of a hair shirt. You put it on to torture yourself. To be a holy Christian is to be a miserable Christian. To be holy is not to be isolated. To be holy is to separate ourselves from that which is in our former ignorance, unto the healthiness that is in God. If I were using a synonym for the word “holy,” I’d call it “healthy.” God is healthy. If you want to know what perfect character and personality is that distinguishes God from us, just look at the nature of His being. He is wholesome, healthy. “Be holy, not fashioning yourselves in the desires of your former ignorance.”

What were those former desires? Paul tells us in Ephesians: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:25–28, NIV). As a Christian we ought to have automatically laid aside profanity. I think it’s a mark of further spiritual growth that we lay off the kind of talk that destroys each other in human relationships. We throw words at one another like heavy bricks. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29–32, NIV). “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (5:3,4, NIV).

That’s putting off the former fashions. Peter gives us these steps to a holy life by saying, walk as children of obedience. Don’t fashion yourselves according to your former passions. Be imitators of God. Holiness, in the last analysis, is being like God, becoming like God. It’s not an instant process. It’s “become holy as I am holy.” Holiness is conforming to His character. The easygoing Christian has no deep sense of sin because he has no clear vision of God. But once we get a clear vision of God we want to be like Him.

So, Peter says, in a situation where you’re hard-pressed and you want to take leave of your senses and you want to do what some people do when they’re rejected in a romance and just rebound. That’s one of the things we do when we’re pressed. We rebound and do something profligate and far-out and kind of reel at the impact of what we’ve been through. Peter says, “Believers that I’m writing to, draw yourselves into God and become holy. Watch your attitude and disposition of heart.”

III. Live in reverent fear.

The third therapy that Peter puts before us is the therapy which we’ll identify simply as fear. “Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers in reverent fear” (1 Peter 1:17). It seems strange to be summoned to fear when we’re summoned so much of the time in Scripture to faith. Fear is not a slavish groveling in God’s presence. Fear here is respect. It is awe. It is reverence. The Christian life is to be conducted with a godly fear, a deep heart reverence toward God.

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

Peter says there are two motivations for this deep fear of God. One is the prospect of judgment. He judges each man's work impartially. We know as believers that once we come to Christ we've already passed from death unto life and we have been saved. I'm not waiting to get to heaven to find out whether I'm going to heaven or hell when I meet God. That issue was already settled when I gave my life to Christ. But there is a judgment ahead of even the believer. Not the judgment related to heaven or hell. It's the judgment related to works. Each one of us will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and answer for what we've done in the flesh. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3 that if any of us build upon the foundation of Christ or salvation using gold or silver and costly stones, wood, hay or straw, our work will be shown for what it is. If we've built with precious things, it will last. If we haven't, it will go aside and all that will remain is our salvation. We are encouraged and admonished in the Scripture to recognize that God is going to hold us accountable for our life as a Christian. He's going to hold us accountable for our decisions and our works. And that there are going to be rewards. Knowing the fear of the Lord, as Paul says, we persuade people. Because we have this deep sense that we are accountable to God, we want to be involved in Christian stewardship and working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

But there's another thing that motivates us in regard to the fear of the Lord or the respect for the Lord. It's not only the prospect of judgment, but it's the very real presence of His love. "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:18-21, NIV).

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

The love of Christ causes us to walk in reverence for Him. We've been redeemed with His blood.

The full great salvation of the Lord is certified to us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because He's loved us so much, we respond in reverential respect and love and adoration of Him. Fear of the Lord.

Don't fear the emperor, Peter is saying. Don't fear the persecutors. Don't fear the adversities.

Don't fear the person you think has power in your life. Fear the Lord. Obey Him first. Get your priorities straight with Him.

IV. Love one another deeply from the heart.

The fourth therapy that Peter gives us as a counselor when we are hard-pressed is the therapy of love.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:22–25, NIV).

Love. That great magical word. There's the lexical meaning of “love.” There's the behavioral meaning of love—how love acts. But most important of all is the way love is experienced. That's what Peter is telling us when he says, “Love one another deeply from the heart.” Love is the natural product of being born again. Peter is saying that new birth flows from God's Word, and whatever His Word brings into being endures. An aspect of that enduring act of God is the love which is produced in our heart. We're to love one another.

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

Again, that's an important word when we're going through a high-pressure, hard-pressed situation. The temptation might be to withdraw into our shell, to close the doors in our room, to have a massive breakdown of depression because of all the adversity that we're facing. To closet ourselves and isolate ourselves from it and disappear into some dream world or soap opera world on television or something like that. But Peter is saying in that moment reach the therapy of reaching out and loving each other and extending yourself.

It ought not to take hard times in our lives to get us to share with other Christians. It ought to be just a regular enduring process of our lives that we're reaching out in love toward each other.

Peter is saying have toward one another that same love of God that doesn't break off relationships because something has gone wrong. But reaches out in the midst of adversity.

V. Crave the Word.

The fifth therapy that Peter gives us is to crave the Word, verses 1–3 of chapter 2. “Therefore having laid aside all malice...” There are five things he tells us to strip from our lives, completely strip off, and the first is malice. What is malice? It is a settled ill will, a mean disposition. It's a person who is continually irritable, touchy, defensive, always mad. You've always got to be careful how you approach them because they're mad. Some of you live with people like that. Some of you *are* people like that! Discourteous. Argumentative. Having laid it aside, and laid aside all guile—which is deceit or to catch with bait—and laid aside all hypocrisy. The root of hypocrisy means, “to speak under.” It comes from the time when the Greeks in the theater wore masks to represent a character. They would speak from under the mask. They would be playing a role. Peter says having laid aside all false role-playing, all masks, and all envying, which is feeling ill will towards someone else's blessings. And laying aside all evil speaking or

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

slanders, speaking against another person, defaming them, having laid aside these things we may then “crave spiritual milk.”

If you're not hungry in your life for the Word of God, perhaps one of the reasons is that you have not begun to work in these areas of your life of laying aside malice and deceit and hypocrisy and evil, guile and the like. God wants us to go to work in those areas of our life which are clearly not in conformity to Christ. As we begin to say, “Holy Spirit, invade my life and take these things from me,” rising in their place comes this deep desire for the pure Word of God which we are to crave. Crave pure spiritual milk.

I think you almost have to have lived in the Orient to understand what Peter's saying here—crave pure spiritual milk. In China, we had to buy milk. You had to be careful that you got milk that wasn't 65 percent water and 35 percent milk. The merchants would dilute it. If you weren't careful you could buy some very worthless milk. You needed to get somebody who was trustworthy in order to get the good, pure milk with the cream on the top.

Peter is saying this about our desire for the Word of God. Don't let it be the Word of God which comes to us simply because it may titillate us for the moment and be exactly what we were looking for. But take the whole dosage of God's Word. Its purity, its totality, its completeness. Absorb it in our life. What tremendous advice when we're going through struggle and anxiety in our life to be able to reach into God's Word and find a compass and find a foundation and find a direction for ourselves.

These are the therapies for struggling Christians—hope, be holy, fear, love, and crave pure spiritual milk. I would like to encourage you to get going on these therapies if you're in struggles. If you're not in struggles, work on them anyway because you'll have them sooner or later.

FIVE THERAPIES FOR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

I Peter 1:13-2:3

When you're hurting and struggling you don't want to work on the problem. You want to go to bed and cry into your pillow, "O God, I want to drown in the tears of my own self-pity. Kill me now and let me go to heaven!" We look for somebody else to come in and solve our problems. If we could just get the money to handle the situation. If we could just have the member of the family causing the affliction magically change or maybe even be replaced by someone more perfect. If we could just get the change from the outside. The Lord is saying all along there's a therapy to put to work in your own life. Use it in the morning, use it in the evening, use it all the time in between. Work on these things. Hope, be holy, fear, love, crave pure spiritual milk and see the window of opportunity and see the doorway of spiritual health.

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank You for Your Word which indeed is a light to our path. Lighten up our way today with it, Lord. Into the undiscipline of our life bring the discipline of Your Word and give us, O Lord, an implanting of Your Word as we go from this place, that we might be both doers and hearers. We ask in the Lord's name. Amen.