

WHY YOU CAN STAND STRONG

1 PETER 1:1-12

“What life does to us depends on what life finds in us.” (Anonymous) Every experience in life shapes you. That’s especially true of life’s tests, life’s troubles, life’s trials – or you might call them – life’s storms. At the time they’re extremely negative, but put into the hands of God, they can leave a positive, godly deposit in that part of you that’s going to live forever. Today, I want to begin a walk with you through a portion of God’s Word known as the first letter of Peter. He touches on many different topics, but there’s one unifying theme that runs through the whole letter – how to stand strong in the storms of life. That was a major concern for the people who first read Peter’s letter. It remains a major concern for God’s people today. How can you stand strong in the storms of life? What should be your attitude to a storm in your life? Has God given you resources to survive life’s storms? Why does God even allow storms to blow into your life and mine in the first place? Peter deals with all those questions in his letter.

As we begin, let me lay a foundation. The author is Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ original disciples, writing probably some 30 years after Jesus rose again and went back to Heaven. The letter was addressed to Christians living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. Those were all regions or Roman provinces in what today is the country of Turkey. Someone had brought the good news of Jesus to these folk and they’d become followers of Jesus. Groups of believers met together in homes – little, but very real churches - to worship God and encourage one another. The storms of life were blowing hard on them. They were getting battered and beat up pretty badly and so Peter writes this letter to encourage them and provide them a godly perspective.

So, let’s read the first twelve verses of 1 Peter just now. Peter actually provides right here several reasons why those first century Christians could still stand strong despite the ferocity of life’s storms. The reasons he provides apply just as much to you and me as to them. First, you can stand strong in the storms of life because...

YOU’VE BEEN CHOSEN FOR THE GREATEST PURPOSE.

God wanted you long before you ever wanted Him. I read that right in v. 1, “To God’s elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father....” (1 Pt 1:1 NIV) Some people see that word “foreknowledge” and assume it means that God knows in advance if you will trust Jesus for salvation or not and, then, on that basis, selects or elects you to become His child. But that’s not what “foreknowledge” means. Instead, “to foreknow” means “to set one’s love on a person or persons in a personal way.” It recognizes that God loved you long before you loved Him or even knew anything about Him. It means God decided to make you an object of His grace, His mercy and His love long before you were born, long before you first heard the name of Jesus, and long before the Holy Spirit even put a desire in your heart to know God.

You’re weren’t chosen by God because you deserved to be chosen, because you earned being chosen, or even because God knew you’d be a good person. The Bible makes it clear you were chosen by God even before you had a chance to do anything

good or bad. Why, then, did God choose you? Only God knows! All any of us can ever say is, “God, I guess the only reason you chose me is because you love me.” Now, God did have a purpose in selecting you to belong to Him. It’s the single greatest reason of all! What is it? To know and serve God personally. The greatest purpose in all the universe is to know and serve the God of the Universe in a personal way.

I wish all of us could get that truth through our thick skulls and keep it there! Instead, we have a habit of making other things the “be and the end all” of life, don’t we? Let me suggest this analogy. Do you remember what mattered to you when you were a teenager? For many young people going through that period of life, the greatest purpose in all of life is to be popular – to have people like and admire you. For others it’s to excel at some sport, or make outstanding grades, or be considered good looking. At the time – those teenage years – nothing seems more important. You agonize over them, lose sleep because of them, and get obsessed by them. But, as you move on into adulthood, you look back and realize how shallow and empty what you thought was so important looks now. The same sort of thing happens when you become a genuine follower of Jesus. You look back on your life before Jesus and realize how empty it was to make getting rich the greatest purpose of your life, or how shallow it was to make having a successful career the greatest goal of your life, or how hollow it was to make parties on the weekend or some great vacation the focus of your life.

If you’re a genuine follower of Jesus – born again by and filled up with the Spirit of God – you know there’s no greater purpose in all of life than to know and serve God personally. This is what matters most. This is what gives life its meaning, its value, and its substance. There are many important things in life, that’s true, but they all come in a distant second to knowing and serving God. Notice what else Peter says is involved in being chosen. He says that you’ve “... been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit...” (1 Pt 1:2 NIV) To sanctify something means to set it apart for a specific purpose. For example, the dishes in your kitchen cabinet back home today are set apart for the purpose of eating. You could say they’re “sanctified” for that purpose! You don’t play Frisbee in the back yard with them or hang them on the wall as a decoration. The fact is that you were set apart to know and serve God personally. That’s your purpose and it’s a great one!

Notice also that you’ve “...been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father ... to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.” (1 Pt 1:2 NIV) What does that mean? Well, back in the Old Testament, the blood of sacrificial animals was sprinkled on the altar in the Temple as a sign of forgiveness. Peter is saying that you were chosen by God to obey Jesus’ teachings because He shed His blood on the cross for you. Jesus is now the Boss of your life. Yes, He is and always will be the most loving, gracious Boss you could ever have. But make no mistake about it. He’s always your Boss. He has the highest and most comprehensive set of expectations for you that any earthly boss could ever have.

So what does this have to do with standing strong in the storms of life? My friend, if you are chosen by God, then you have infinite value, worthy and dignity. You’re not a

mistake. God has a great purpose both for you and your life. If God who chose you is sovereign and in control – and He most certainly is that – then the storms of life are not a mistake either. Your life – all of it and every piece of it – has meaning, purpose, and value. Yes, God sends some storms. Other storms He may not have sent, but He does allow them to blow into your life. Think about this for a moment: no storm can come into your life or mine that God has not either sent or allowed. Furthermore, any and every storm can be used by God to fulfill His greatest purpose in your life – to know Him more and to serve Him better. So, by the power of God’s Spirit, stand strong!

Jerry Sittser was driving the family van with his wife, mother and daughter on board. A drunken driver coming from the opposite direction, crossed into their lane and struck the van. In a second, Jerry’s life was changed forever. He watched his wife, mother and daughter all die right before his eyes. Later, he wrote a book entitled *A Grace Disguised* and he said, “As I reflect on the story of my loss, I have learned that though entirely unique (as all losses are), it is a manifestation of a universal experience. Sooner or later, people suffer loss, in little doses or big ones, suddenly or over time, privately or in public settings. Loss is as much a part of normal life as birth, for as surely as we are born into this world we suffer loss before we leave it. It is not, therefore, the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment in our lives... It is how we respond to loss that matters. The response will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives.” You can stand strong in the storms of life, secondly, because...

YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN THE GREATEST PRESENT.

Here again is what Peter says in the verses we read, “All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.” (1 Pt 1:3-4 NLT) Many times, parents pass along some kind of inheritance to their kids: money, property, stocks, or other kinds of possessions. An inheritance is simply a gift or a present by another name. When you become a child of God, you become an heir of His estate. There’s nothing more noble, dignified and special than to be an heir of the living God.

So what is this inheritance that we get as God’s children? Another word for it is salvation – all God does for us in the past, present, and future. Did you know that the Bible speaks of salvation in the past tense (you have been saved), in the present tense (you are being saved right now), and in the future tense (you will be saved)? In the past, you were saved from sin’s penalty. Jesus died on the cross and, by doing so, paid for the penalty of your sin. All of your sins were forgiven. Your destiny was hell, but God changed your destiny. That’s salvation in the past. Right now today, you’re being saved from sin’s power. Of course, you can sin right there sitting in the pew looking spiritual or 5 minutes after you walk out the door. But the more you love God and grow in His grace, the less you love sin, the less you enjoy doing things that displease God, and the less you give into temptation. Sin’s power is gradually losing its grip on you.

life with each passing day. More and more, the Holy Spirit is filling you with His power and ability to live a life that pleases God, praises God and brings honor to Him. That's salvation in the present. Now, in the future, you'll be saved from even the presence of sin. The Bible says that in Heaven, there will be no more sin, no more failure, and no more temptation. You'll obey God effortlessly and naturally – just like you breathe air this morning. You'll enjoy a relationship with God that I can't begin to describe for you today and it will never end. I believe we'll get the privilege of continuing to serve God in Heaven in remarkable, wonderful ways. Can you think of a greater, better present than the one I just described? Can anything in this life compare to God's present?

God's present is more wonderful than any other gift because it's eternal and permanent. Sure, your parents or a rich uncle can give you money, property, or other stuff. But it can get lost, stolen or damaged. And when it's used up, it's gone forever. But Peter reminds us that God's present is different. You can't lose it. You can never use all of it up. No one can take it from you. Its value can never be reduced. Do you realize the value of the gift that God has given to you? Peter tries to convey the immense privilege of it all there in v. 10-12. He reminds us that the Old Testament prophets knew God was going to do something incredibly wonderful, but they didn't know exactly what. Peter says something intriguing there in v. 12. "It is all so wonderful that even the angels are eagerly watching these things happen." (1 Pt 1:12 NLT) Angels have never experienced God's grace and forgiveness. I'm sure they know a whole lot more about worshiping God than we do. I'm sure they know far more about God's majesty, power and wisdom than we do. But because they're not sinners and Jesus didn't die on the cross for them, they can't know experientially what it means to be forgiven by God or receive His grace. What a gift you and I have been given!

In October 2005, Moses Bittok celebrated an experience he had waited a lifetime to achieve: he became a U.S. citizen. That alone would have been enough to give the native Kenyan the happiest day of his life, but it was just a prelude. On the way home from the Des Moines, Iowa, federal building where he became a U.S. citizen, Bittok stopped at a gas station to see the winning numbers in the Iowa state "Hot Lotto Game." He was surprised to find out that he had just won \$1.89 million. He said, "It doesn't happen anywhere—I guess only in America." Pretty amazing, true enough, but not nearly as amazing as God's present, God's gift, and God's inheritance for you. The moment you became a follower of Jesus, you received citizenship in the Kingdom of God and a heavenly reward that's beyond any monetary value imaginable.

So, what does this have to do with standing strong in the storms of life? It's only when you begin to realize how awesome and magnificent God's gift is to you that you can get the right perspective about any and all of life's storms. You couldn't get that perspective any other way. Whatever storm you are experiencing this morning is probably taking a whole lot out of you emotionally, spiritually, physically, or financially, but it's nothing compared to what you're going to get when the full value of God's gift, God's present, and God's inheritance is experienced. So, by the power of God's Spirit, stand strong! Now, here's a third reason why you can stand strong in the storms of life.

YOUR TRIALS HAVE THE GREATEST POTENTIAL.

God's Word here says, "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world." (1 Pt 1:6-7 NLT) Now, what were these Christians to whom Peter was writing going through? Apparently, they were starting to get persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Some were being physically attacked and injured. Others were losing jobs or being economically marginalized because they followed Jesus. Many were being ridiculed, scorned or hated just because of their belief in Jesus. Peter hints that the worst was still ahead and history proved him right. A few years after he wrote this letter, there was a terrible fire in the city of Rome and then Emperor Nero blamed the fire on Christians living in the city. Followers of Jesus were martyred there and throughout the Roman Empire. Peter himself, we're led to believe, died as a martyr at the command of Nero himself a short time after he wrote this letter. But at the time Peter wrote what is now 1 Peter, the persecution was painful but not as serious yet.

We're so fortunate to still live in a country where we aren't persecuted for our belief in Jesus. I know there are many people who hate Christian beliefs and values, but we haven't yet experienced anything like what was happening to Peter's friends. I realize that may not be true forever. But there are Christians in other countries today – like Iraq, like Syria, like Egypt, like Pakistan, like North Korea, for example – who are seriously persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Some are sold into slavery. Some are maimed and injured. Others are imprisoned. Some are killed. What Peter writes in his letter has a very direct application to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted. But there's a very real, derived application for us today as well. What Peter writes about life's storms can apply to more than just the storm of persecution. He gives us God's perspective about how to face any of life's storms.

Notice, first, what Peter doesn't say about life's storms. He doesn't say you're entitled to a storm-free life. He never says that when you have a storm it's somehow proof that God doesn't love you. He doesn't say that every storm in your life is the result of some sin you committed. Instead, he just assumes that every follower of Jesus will have storms in his or her life. And, of course, life itself bears out the truth of that conclusion. Like everyone else on the planet, Christians face storms in their marriages, storms with their kids, storms with their health, and storms with money and job situations. Any suggestion that being a child of God gives you some kind of an automatic exemption from all of life's storms is completely contrary to the Bible's teachings.

But what does Peter say about life's storms? Primarily, he says that they have great potential, when you put them in God's hands, to help you achieve God's great purpose for your life. In other words, storms can actually help you know God more and serve Him better. Peter compares it to gold that needs refining. There is such a thing as "fool's gold". It looks like real gold, but it's actually a kind of iron. When you apply fire to

fool's gold, it reveals that you don't have real gold at all. When you apply fire to real gold, it burns away anything that isn't gold and leaves the real gold intact – more beautiful and precious than ever. Storms have the same effect on your life and mine. They test the reality of your faith in God. They burn away the stuff in you that has no spiritual value or worth. They force you to trust God in ways that are new to you and so your "faith muscle" grows and gets stronger.

But notice that these trials in life have great *potential*. Sometimes people give up on God because of life's storms. They say by their actions, "Well, if God can't do a better job of protecting me from unpleasant stuff, then, forget the whole thing. I'll just go back to being a pagan." And they do. I've seen that as a pastor and it's very sad to see. People do give up on God because of life's storms. It's your choice. You can say instead, "God, this storm is really bad right now. I feel like I could get blown away by it right now. I don't know how much longer I can hold on. But, God, I'm going to trust you, nevertheless. I believe you have a purpose in allowing this storm – or sending this storm – that I may not understand until I get to Heaven. I believe you've allowed this storm into my life to develop and grow me, not to destroy me."

I believe that's what Peter meant about rejoicing in the midst of life's storms. "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while." (1 Pt 1:6 NLT) It's not that God expects you to say right in the middle of some storm, "Wow, God, I sure am enjoying this storm! It's just the best! Whoopee! I'm so happy about all this wind and rain. Please send me bigger and better storms!" No, instead, you can simply rejoice in what that storm will ultimately produce in your life if you hang in there with God. You can say, "God, I really hate what's happening right now in my life. But thank You that Your Word says it's going to help me know You more and serve You better. Thank You that You won't let this storm last one minute longer than it needs to in order for it to do in me what it's supposed to do. So, by the power of Your Spirit working in me, I will stand strong!"

Several women were studying the Bible together. They came upon this verse: "He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross...." (Mal 3:3 NLT) It puzzled them, so one of them offered to find out more about refining silver and share her discoveries at the next Bible study. That week she called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work refining silver. He held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needs to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames are the hottest. That burns away all the impurities in the metal. He also told the woman that he had to sit there in front of the fire the entire time the silver was being refined. He had to keep a very careful eye on the silver while it was in the fire. If it was left a moment too long, it could be destroyed. The woman asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled and said, "Oh, that's easy- when I can see myself in it." If you're feeling the heat of some fire today – or some wind and water from a storm in life – remember that God has His eye on you and will keep watching you carefully. He won't keep you there one second longer or one second less than absolutely needed. How will He know when enough is enough? When He can see His image in you. So stand strong!