

Peter's Perspective on Persecution "Participating in the Divine Nature"

Passages: 2 Peter 1:1–11
John 15:1–5

Today, we begin to look at Peter's second letter. Like the first letter, this one was also written to fellow Christians scattered around Greece, Turkey and Asia Minor who were being persecuted for their faith. Peter makes reference to this fact in chapter 3 when he says, "**Dear friends, this is now my second letter. I have written both of these letters as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.**" Clearly, this second letter continues the discussion which Peter began in the first letter.

But there's something different about this second letter. Although Peter is writing to the same believers who were being persecuted for their faith, this time he doesn't dwell on their persecution. Although he may occasionally speak about perseverance, Peter says surprisingly little about the **negative** experiences these Christians were facing. (If you remember, that seemed to be the primary focus of his first letter.) Rather, Peter now wants his readers to reflect on the **positive** aspects of Christian growth that come from persecution.

What could be **positive** about persecution? Well, Peter speaks of how God wants to use our suffering to enhance our knowledge and personal experience of the living Lord, Jesus Christ. It's an idea that might be best be summarised by the word, **alignment!**

Anyone who owns a car will know what **alignment** is—Alignment is when all four tyres on your car are expertly aimed and fine-tuned to roll in the same direction. If one tyre is slightly out of alignment, not only will the rubber on that tyre wear down more quickly, but your car may shake, the steering wheel may wobble, your fuel consumption will increase, and you could even lose

control of your car at high speeds. By getting your tyres aligned, your car will have the best possible contact with the road... particularly when bad weather comes and the road gets wet and slippery.

Now, let's take this image of a wheel alignment and apply it to our lives. Imagine yourself as the car and the daily routine of your life as the four tyres. Then, imagine God as the road. Is your life in alignment with God? Are all aspects of your daily life fine-tuned to move in exactly the same direction? Are you in optimum connection with God so that even the storms of life cannot dislodge you from the road?

This idea of **alignment** helps us to understand Peter's words in verses 1 to 4. Peter, you see, wants us to remember one essential truth— namely, that, through Jesus Christ, **God has already done everything necessary to make our alignment with Him possible.** Because the movement is from God to us, the key words in these verses are about God “giving” and us “receiving”.

1. Look at verse 1! “**Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ **have received** a faith as precious as ours...**” Here is the first thing that God has done to make our alignment with Him possible— Out of the overflow of His **righteousness**, we have received faith!

2. Look at verse 2! “**Grace and peace **be yours** in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.**” Similarly, it is from the overflow of **God's self-revelation** that we have received an abundance of grace and peace.

3. Look at verse 3! “**His divine power **has given** us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.**” Out of the overflow of **His divine power**, He has given us everything we need for a godly life!

4. Look at verse 4! “**Through these he **has given** us his very**

great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature..." From the overflow of **His divine promises**, we are drawn-in to **participate in the divine nature!**

In Peter's mind, it is clear that God has done everything necessary for us to live our lives in **alignment** with Him! Starting with His incarnation, and then through His death and resurrection, God has not only sent Jesus to clear away every obstacle that could hinder human beings from entering into an eternal union with God, but through Jesus, we now have everything we need to stay intimately connected to God. Through Jesus, God has poured out upon us the heavenly gifts of faith, peace, grace, power and promises! It is God alone who makes our **alignment** with Him possible!

Why was this idea of **alignment** so important to Peter? Let's go back to the situation into which he was writing where Christians were being persecuted on a daily basis. In Peter's first letter, he encouraged his readers to persevere in the faith by remembering the sufferings of Christ. He wanted them to look back to the past and to emulate the way Jesus patiently endured through the suffering of His own persecution.

That, of course, was good advice,...but it was incomplete advice. In this second letter, Peter offers an equally important way to persevere through suffering—How? By looking ahead! As we acknowledge the amazing gifts of God in Christ by which He **aligns** us with Himself, we become more and more assured that God is "for us"! We know, therefore, that He will never leave us or forsake us in our suffering. In His great desire for **alignment** (intimacy) with us, He will carry us through all future suffering.

Indeed, one could go so far as to say that this, essentially, is what salvation is all about! For God did not send Jesus into the world simply to get us into heaven, but to bring us back into **alignment** with Himself through an ongoing process of **universal**

transformation. God’s plan of salvation is to make us “fit” for heaven by changing us on earth... “from one degree of glory to another”. It is happening now, as God aligns our hearts and minds and shapes us for future glory. And that’s why negative things, like suffering and persecution, can be used for positive ends; to bring us into greater **alignment** with God...deeply connected into His heart and into His transformational purposes for this world!

The Apostle Paul had exactly the same understanding! In Romans 8, Paul confidently declares: **“And we know that in all things (even persecution) God works together for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son. That He might be the firstborn among many brothers.”** Like Peter, Paul is also talking about **alignment**.

Central to this idea of **alignment** is the phrase which Peter uses in verse 4. Peter talks about **“participating in the divine nature.”** What does he mean?

The second century theologian, Irenaeus, understood these words as an essential summary of our salvation. Irenaeus said, “Through His transcendent love, our Lord Jesus Christ became what we are, that He might make us to be what He is.” In Irenaeus’ mind, the whole plan of salvation consisted of this eternal process of raising up fallen human beings, restoring and renewing them in the original image of God. That is why Christ came. This is why He died, and why He was raised from the dead; that we might be raised with Him from death and be reborn in His resurrection life! What we, in the Western Church, commonly think of as the separate steps of conversion, justification and sanctification are, in the Eastern Church, all rolled into one life-long process of being “conformed into the image of Christ”. Today, the Eastern Orthodox Church calls this process “divinisation” or “deification”, although it is far more accurate to call it “Christification”—becoming more and more like Christ!

Athanasius, in the fourth century, spoke of this idea of divinisation even more forcefully when he said, “God became man that man might become god.” I know it may sound a bit like “new-age” thinking, but his point was not that we become absorbed into God but that, through God’s Son, we are born-again as God’s sons and daughters and gradually transformed in the renewed image of God, brought into “face-to-face” communion with Him.

Interestingly, in the 18th century, John and Charles Wesley fully accepted this idea of **divinisation**. In fact, John Wesley’s conversion experience at Aldersgate was largely brought on by reading this passage from 2 Peter 1:4. And while John rode all over England, preaching that “participation in the divine nature” was the key to “life and salvation”, his brother, Charles, wrote hymns which celebrated this truth. Here is one verse of a Charles Wesley hymn:

Heavenly Adam, life divine
Change my nature into thine;
Move and spread throughout my soul,
Actuate and fill the whole;
Be it I no longer now
Living in the flesh, but Thou.

As you can tell, Wesley’s focus was on the life-long process of transforming a sinner to become more and more like Jesus. This is exactly what Peter was talking about when he spoke of “**participating in the divine nature.**” Of primary importance to Peter was the fact that this is not something for which we needed to strive or work—it is the free gift of God! God has done everything to align Himself with us and us with Him, through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. By this divine alignment, we now have every opportunity to be transformed and intimately connected to God...to “**participate in the divine nature**”!

But, of course, it takes two to tango! Although God has done everything to align us with Him, Peter goes on, in verses 5 to 11, to suggest that **this alignment will not grow and expand unless we make an effort to engage with God’s purposes!** Let

me read verses 5 to 11 again.

⁵For this very reason, **make every effort** to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;⁷and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, my brothers and sisters,^[a] **make every effort** to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Once again, it's important to remember the overall context of Peter's letter. He was writing to Christians who were suffering severe persecution. Although Peter has reminded them of all the things God has done in Christ to bring them into **alignment** with his heart, he now goes on to ask them if they will allow this **alignment** to take place? Although God will never forsake them in their suffering, will they forsake God?

This is why Peter tells them to **"make every effort"** to avail themselves of what God has done; to take all the wonderful resources for **alignment** that God has given His church and to multiply them in becoming more and more like Christ!

Essentially, **Peter is encouraging them to use their persecution for a good cause!** After all, when we are in the midst of persecution, we suddenly discover how weak and vulnerable we are. We realise that we have no hope in ourselves. We become far more open and receptive to God's gifts of faith, grace and peace; we long to taste of His divine power to lead us into godly living. In short, suffering can drive us **deeper** into God's arms that we might more fully "participate in the divine nature", being more **aligned** with God's life, His purposes and His plans.

Sometimes, I wonder if we, as 21st century Christians, couldn't use a little persecution to drive us more deeply into God's arms! For the sad fact is that so many Christians today make very little

effort to utilise what God has already provided to keep us in **alignment** with His heart! Too often, we are so content...so comfortable... the way we are; so self-satisfied and self-assured, that even though we say we are Christians, we rarely feel any need to **“make an effort”** to draw closer to Him. As a result, our salvation stagnates, simply because we are not availing ourselves of the divine **alignment** which God has initiated with us in His Son; we are not taking advantage of it; we are not **“making any effort”** to pursue a life of transformation into Christ’s likeness!

Perhaps it’s a good time for us to ask ourselves one simple question: Am I truly “participating in the divine nature”? Am I availing myself of the deeper walk of faith that God is constantly offering to me in and through Jesus Christ?

Let me finish with a story:

Chief Crowfoot was the Indian chief of the Blackfoot nation in southern Alberta, Canada. It was Chief Crowfoot who made a treaty with the Canadian government which gave the Canadian Pacific Railway permission to lay thousands of miles of track across Blackfoot land; from Medicine Hat to Calgary. In return, Chief Crowfoot was given a lifetime railroad pass. Reportedly, Crowfoot put the pass in a leather pouch and wore it around his neck for the rest of his life—but he never once availed himself of the rights and privileges it spelled out!

How many Christians are (like Chief Crowfoot)? We possess "all the treasures of wisdom & knowledge" in Christ. We possess all the potential to be deeply aligned with God’s heart and to participate in the divine nature...**and yet**, tragically, we live each day as veritable spiritual paupers? What's the solution? Peter gives it to us in these verses!

“Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

“Make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, ¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Isn't this exactly what Jesus said in John 15? **“Remain in me and I will remain in you.” “Apart from me you can do nothing!”**

Let's pray.