

**4:1-6—DON'T GET AROUND MUCH ANYMORE**

**The Text (NRSV)**

*4:1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), 2 so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. 3 You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. 5 But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.*

**What's going on here?**

-v.1-2—Chapter 4 begins with a “therefore,” which again points us back to what has just come before it. Our author is connecting back to the recurring theme of Christ’s own suffering and its impact on the lives of believers (a theme we’ve seen in 2:4, 2:21-24, and 3:18). 4:1 most immediately follows from 3:18’s assertion that Christ suffered “once for all...in order to bring you to God.” There is a sense for our author that there is a *purpose* or goal for believers that results from Christ’s suffering and death. And a crucial element of that purpose is that believers are led in to a new way of life. For 1 Peter, one effect of Christ’s suffering for us is the possibility for us to be freed from our old ways of life, which he sees as contrary to the ways of the will of God (4:2).

In many ways, this stream of thought is very similar to Paul’s in Romans 6:1-14, where Paul says that our baptism into Christ’s death (and suffering) means that we, too, have died to sin and are freed from living in it. Romans 6:6 says in Paul’s language essentially the same thing as 1 Pet. 4:1-2—“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” Both Paul and 1 Peter here have in mind that Christ’s death frees us not only from the condemnation or penalty that results from sin (the idea we are no longer declared

“guilty,” to use the courtroom metaphor), but *also* it frees us from the actual power of sin to lead us further into sin. We are no longer slaves to sin—no longer bound to living in ways that break relationship with God, with creation, with others, and with ourselves. The rest of this whole section will highlight the contrast, then, between the old way of life and the new way of life made possible in Christ.

But first a word on what this passage does *not* mean. The parenthetical phrase at the end of 4:1, “for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin,” certainly sounds as though it means that Christians don’t commit sin anymore. This opens up a whole Pandora’s box for believers, leading us to wonder if we are really still believers, really still the beloved of God, if we make mistakes and if we continue in sin. And this would be to twist the meaning of Peter’s words here. (Really, if this were the case and our author thought that true Christians never sinned, there would be no need to warn them against suffering for “doing evil” in 2:20 and 3:17.)

There are two possibilities of what is going on here—neither of which is that believers will never sin again. The first is that this is really a reference to Christ, not to believers in Christ. The NRSV translates the phrase as “whoever has suffered,” but a better translation would be “the *one* who has suffered.” In

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**LOOKING FOR MORE?**

*The new way of life, apart from sin, accomplished through Christ's death is also seen in:*

● *2 Cor. 5:21*—“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

● *Gal. 3:13-14*—“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise...”

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In this case, “the one” would not mean *anyone* generically, but a particular “one”—Christ. A second possibility for the meaning of this phrase is to take that idea a step further and to apply it to the lives of believers. The sense of the phrase would then be that *because* Christ has suffered “once and for all” (3:18), Christians are now free from the power of sin to dominate their actions and wills. Again, though, this is not to say that “real” Christians will not sin any longer—otherwise, the ethical instruction that follows in 4:7ff would not be necessary to give.

-v.3-4—Regardless of our author’s specific emphasis, the basic sense of 4:1-2 and much of the material that preceded it is that Christ’s suffering makes possible for us a *new* way of life, but one that will in many ways be at odds with the *old* way of life. This contrast between the past and present life of believers—especially believers who had come from Gentile backgrounds—is stressed here in 4:3-4. (The fact that, in 4:3, 1 Peter contrasts the way of Christians with the ways of the “Gentiles,” when in fact many of his readers *were* Gentiles, shows how definitive he understood the Christian community to be. These Christ-believers were no longer Gentiles, but members of the people of God.)

There seems to have been a sense from very early on within the Christian community that their faith in Christ meant ceasing to be involved with certain elements of Greco-Roman culture. The concern of 1 Peter is not that Christians needed to stop doing things that were against the law—no, that was presumed as a given. The issue here is the call away from practices and attitudes that are perfectly acceptable to the prevailing culture. This is where real tension arose between the church and the surrounding society. At one level, Christians refused to be ruled by their desires and stopped indulging (although that does not necessarily mean *abstaining*) in alcohol, giving themselves over to sexual immorality, and other excesses. It’s not that the early church was extremely puritanical or prudish, although clearly the Christians of the 1st century were concerned about private morality as well as public. But even more significant than the acts of “carousing” and “passions” in and of themselves were the ways that these kinds of activities were enmeshed within Greco-Roman religious rituals. Festivals, whether for Greek and Roman deities, for the emperor as divine, or in celebration of the empire itself, were often celebrated with these kinds of libertine decadence. And it was principally these *religious* overtones of these celebrations that raised red flags for Christians—aside from the issues of the morality of “drunkenness” or “carousing,” they could not participate because all too often those kinds of celebrations were involved in the worship of something

other than the one true God who had raised Jesus from the dead. Thus our author’s list of vices in 4:3 culminates in “lawless idolatry”—the chief problem with the festivals and activities in which Christians refused to participate.

In response to the collective withdrawal of Christians from the “excesses of dissipation” of the day, much of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture responded by ostracizing Christians. They were seen as anti-social, and to some degree as threats to the social fabric; by not participating, Christians were throwing into question the validity of civic and religious festivities. It was not so much that non-Christians perceived the church as a political threat that might revolt against the empire. Rather, the church refused to integrate with the rest of society; it became “socially indigestible,” to quote commentator Paul Achtemeier. And as such, Christians were rejected by the rest of society. Here in 1 Peter the situation seems to be non-governmental; Christians are not yet being hunted down by the imperial government, nor is it likely that they are being put to death yet. But they are being marginalized by a surrounding society that cannot understand why Christians aren’t showing up at empire-sponsored orgies anymore.

-v.5-6—In response to external ostracism, our author counsels Christians to find hope in the ultimate lordship of the God they serve and love. When they are rejected or maligned by outsiders, Christians can respond with love and good conduct because they know their identity and they know that vindication will come. It is in this light that both 4:5-6 and the previous verses’ talk of withdrawing from social activities needs to be heard. Early Christians didn’t withdraw themselves from Greco-Roman ways because they were party-poopers—they just knew there was a better party to be invited to.

The vindication for which Christians hoped was, of course, bound up with the return of Christ at the end of the age, when he would “judge the living and the dead.” It is this sure hope of vindication that stands behind 4:6 as well, even with its cryptic reference to the proclamation “to the dead.” Christian tradition would later come to interpret this passage to mean that Christ went and preached the good news in the realm of the dead, making it possible for them to enter into heaven afterwards. Without getting bogged down too much in detail or in the Greek of the text, suffice it to say that a picture of dead, disembodied souls lingering in some sort of underworld waiting room is not found anywhere else in the New Testament, so it is *extremely* unlikely that our author has this kind of idea in mind here. The idea of a post-mortem altar call is also foreign to the New Testa-

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ment, again making it unlikely that this passage stands alone in teaching that the free-floating souls of dead people were preached to.

All right, then, what *does* the verse mean? Again, the Greek underneath our English translation makes this clearer, but if you'll trust me on a translation note, I'd suggest we read 4:6 as follows:

*"For to this end even ones who are [now] dead were preached the gospel, in order that, although they had been judged in the flesh according to human ways, they might be saved in the spirit according to God's ways."*

The text holds the judgment according to human standards in parallel with judgment according to God's stan-

dards, suggesting a vindication for those who had been maligned or mistreated. What seems likely is that our author has in mind those faithful people, probably both the faithful of the Old Testament stories as well as Christians who had died before the return of Christ. These people faced rejection and suffering but died before the return of Christ when their vindication would come. This fits with the context better than imagining a sermon given to lost souls in limbo or Hades, which has a decidedly Greek feel to it. The idea of good news being received by people in the past who have since died but who will yet be vindicated fits also with the concerns of the Christians in Thessalonica that Paul addresses in 1 Thess. 4:13ff.

**CONNECTIONS—THE LIFE OF A DIFFERENT PARTY**

- ❖ 1 Peter envisions a difficult balance for the Christian community in which Christians may have to refuse to participate in certain activities while not withdrawing completely from the world around them. Think about what this has looked like—or might look like—in your own life. Are there activities you feel you cannot be a part of because of your Christian commitments? At the same time, are there ways you feel called to remain *in* and *with* the community around you rather than withdrawing? What are they?
- ❖ What are elements of our own national culture that become idols and make claims, either implicit or explicit, to be divine? What things or people have become cultural “gods” that we might be tempted to pay homage to?
- ❖ The early church refused to burn incense to the emperor or confess that “Caesar is Lord.” How might those acts be similar or different from something as common and patriotic as saying the Pledge of Allegiance in the United States? Are those comparable acts—why or why not?
- ❖ What kind of consequences are we willing to face for refusing to participate in certain culturally-accepted ways of thinking and acting? What might 1 Peter say about this?
- ❖ How might we be called to *stay in* the world and to interact with the culture around us, when it is all too tempting simply to leave the world behind and regard it as ‘lost’? What might 1 Peter say about *this*?

**4:7-11—STEWARDS OF GOD'S ABUNDANCE****The Text (NRSV)**

*<sup>7</sup>The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. <sup>8</sup>Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup>Be hospitable to one another without complaining. <sup>10</sup>Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. <sup>11</sup>Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

**What's going on here?**

-v.7—What sounds like a rather ominous opening, “the end of all things is near,” is actually intended to be a source of hope and assurance, even as it is a sobering one. The idea of “end,” while it certainly does carry with it connotations of final judgment, was for early Christians a promise of vindication in the face of present suffering (which fits well with the preceding verses, 4:1-6) and an assurance that the brokenness, death, and sadness they new in the world would not get the last word. Beyond all of those realities, God would bring all things to *completion*, a sense which is conveyed by the Greek word translated “end.” The idea that Christians now live on the verge of this final consummation is found throughout the New Testament—see especially Romans 13:12, Hebrews 1:2, and Rev. 22:20.

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-v.8-11—The rest of this passage envisions what the community of hope looks like in its relationships. Whereas 4:3-4 named some of the kinds of self-centered actions that the Christian community was called to renounce, we now get the positive picture in contrast. If the previous section named some of the things Christians are freed **from**, we now get a clearer picture of what they are freed **for**. The over-arching rule for the beloved community is precisely that—to treat each other as *beloved*, both of God and of each other. The opening command of 4:8 is given emphasis—before all else, Christians are to “maintain constant love.” This echoes the same counsel Paul gives to Christians in Rom. 12:9ff and in 1 Cor. 13.

The rest of these verses need to be understood in light of this love-commandment, particularly as this Christian love is *constant* and willing to endure and persevere for the other. This helps to put the second half of 4:8 into perspective. The idea that “love covers a multitude of sins,” an idea common enough to the early church (see also Prov. 10:12b and James 5:20), mostly likely means that love and forgiveness of one another allows the community to move on from past sins. Less likely is that the “sins” mentioned are those of the one showing the love—this would suggest that my action of loving buys my forgiveness in God’s eyes, and our author is unwilling to go in that direction. Rather, it is our author’s commitment to the ongoing love of the community that is in mind here. This is the same idea behind the call to hospitality and the call *away* from complaining—these are both expressions of the enduring, fervent, and forbearing love that knits the community together. The idea of “hospitality” is indeed understood as a manifestation of *love*, not just niceness to others; this is clearer in the Greek, for the word we translate as “hospitality” is actually made up of the words “stranger” and “love.” Hospitality is love for

the *other* in our midst, and its roots within the identity of God’s people goes all the way back to Leviticus 19:34, where the people are called to “love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

One can also see these as marks of God’s love for the community, which for our author is the ground of love between Christians. The thought in vv. 10-11 continues along those lines, stressing how these believers are to bear God’s own love and word to each other. They are stewards of God’s manifold and abundant grace—and so as each has received grace, each is to share it with those around them. This is an important reminder that all we possess, both in material and spiritual terms, has its source in God, which means that we are at most only caretakers and stewards charged with putting our gifts to good use. The language is humbling, in that it reminds us that we do not control or possess the grace bestowed on us, but it is also freeing, because 1 Peter describes that grace as abundant and overflowing. There is always enough to go around, indeed, the love and grace of God spills over and out of every container into which it is poured.

This idea of Christians as *stewards* of God’s grace and God’s word helps us hear 4:11 in its proper light, too. We might be tempted to read the call to speak “as one speaking the very words of God” as though everything we say were backed up with divine authority. This would give us license to stamp our every word as God’s, which is really the opposite of what our author intends. Rather than bolstering our opinions with divine force, the idea is for all of our thoughts and words to be shaped and remolded in light of the character of God. There is never a time when we cease to be stewards of God’s grace, and so there is never a time when we can take our “Christian hats” off and be unloving toward our neighbors. Rather, in all we say and do, we are freed *for* the purpose of living in love and bringing glory to the God who has first loved us.

### CONNECTIONS—BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER

- ◆ What might 1 Peter’s vision of **hospitality** look like in worship? In the gathered church community? In your home? Is hospitality the same as being welcoming and friendly to visitors—is it more than that? Less than that?
- ◆ Think of a time in your own life or church experience where forgiveness of another person was important? What allowed forgiveness to happen—or kept it from happening? What makes forgiveness difficult? What are the long-term results of being able to forgive? Of not being able to forgive? Can a community survive when there is no love to “cover” our sins against each other?
- ◆ What might it look like to speak “as one speaking the very words of God”? How might that affect what we say to each other and how we say it? Will that mean that we never say anything that creates conflict? Is speaking “the very words of God” another way of saying “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all”? What else might it include?