September 26, 2021

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NOT VENDING MACHINE RELIGION

1 Peter 5:10-14

When I was in college I had a number of friends who were from very wealthy families. I got to be quite familiar with the family of one guy in particular. They had inherited much of their money, and they had a lot of it. They owned a very large home in an exclusive and expensive area of LA where a number of full time servants worked for them. They also had a “weekend home” in Newport Beach. This was not a tiny beach shack. It was a spacious house that had at least 5 big bedrooms plus a huge rec room. One of the bedrooms was large enough to have 4 sets of bunk beds, so the kids could have lots of friends over. The house was right on Newport Bay. When you went out the back you walked right onto the sand. It also had a private dock for their sailboat. I looked it up on the internet and found that one of the neighboring houses in the very small, elite enclave the house is in, a house very similar to theirs, is on the market listed at $10.7 million. They just used that house for getaways. It was empty most of the time. My friend could use that house whenever he wanted. There was a grocery store a block or two away, and he could go there and buy whatever he wanted by just putting it on his family’s account. They ran an open tab there and all he had to do was tell them to put his purchases on the account. Of course, as you can imagine, he had a cool car. It was a brand new Pontiac Firebird, a hot muscle car of that day. When vacation time rolled around Europe was always a possible destination for my friend.

I am from a long line of middle class folk. My dad was a high school teacher. We were not poor, but money was never abundant in the Myatt clan. We had enough, but not more. Vacations consisted of going home to Bakersfield. We might have a few days staying in the Motel 6 in Santa Barbara. My friend’s wealth was a foreign world to me. Things he took for granted were pretty much unimaginable to me. It was so alien to me that I never envied him or even thought about having for myself the kinds of things he had. It made sense that he had all he did. His parents had money at a level I could not understand, so it was reasonable to me that they would give their son a lot of cool stuff. They had seriously deep pockets and they loved their son, so of course they would shower him with their wealth. It’s what you do when you love someone.

This is where we can encounter something of a theological problem for us. We know God has unlimited resources. The entire world belongs to him. Psalm 50:10 quotes God saying, “Every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.” The next verse goes on to say he owns everything right down to insects in the fields. God’s wealth is infinite. The Scriptures also tell us he loves us. Ephesians 3:19 says his love for us surpasses knowledge. In other words, it is beyond our ability to comprehend. God, then, is rich, in both money and love. If he loves us that much then surely he wants good for us. I would do anything for my kids and grandkids. I want to bless them in any way I can. I long for them to have gloriously wonderful and joyful lives. Since God is more loving than we are he certainly would want wonderful lives for us even more than we want them for our kids, right? We would expect then, that God will share his abundant wealth and goodness with us. That’s what you do when you love. This is why there are huge numbers of people who buy into the health and wealth Gospel. It makes sense.

This book is about being an alien in this world, about suffering in a broken world where you are an outsider who is oppressed. Peter’s original audience were poor and had hard lives. They put faith in Jesus, and life got *harder!* In addition to the hard things they already dealt with now they were being persecuted for their faith. Where was that loving God in all of this unpleasantness? They wondered, as Christians throughout history have, if God loves me, why doesn’t he make my life better? It surely isn’t because he can’t, so am I left to conclude it’s because he doesn’t want to?

Peter said they should not be surprised by the suffering they were experiencing. That begs the question, “Why not?” Why shouldn’t we be surprised at suffering if God really loves us? Why doesn’t God make it easier for us? Why is life so hard? Where is God in all of this? In 1 Peter 5:10-14 we won’t get the final answer to those “why doesn’t God” kind of questions. However, we gain some insight on how to deal with the hardships of life as well as some perspective on why life is the way it is. We will be thinking about God’s grace, about glory and about how God equips us.

GOD EQUIPS US

In verse 10 Peter assured his readers that the God of all grace would, “after you have suffered a little while, restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” That sounds like we have to endure for a while and if we hang in there, God will finally show up and make things better. He’ll restore us, fix what’s broken, and give us the strength to stand firm. Just endure, then God will fix everything.

That doesn’t seem helpful. I need the strengthening and establishing that Peter talks about while I’m going through the hard times, not after I’ve endured them. If I can endure them on my own then I don’t need God’s strengthening because I must be strong enough. It sounds like God is going to restore us and strengthen us after the fact, but that’s not when we need his help and his strength. So how do we understand this?

The word “after” is not actually in the original text. The translators have it there for a good grammatical reason, but while it is technically correct, I don’t think it’s what Peter intended. I think his intent was “as you are suffering,” not “after you have suffered.” God will restore you, make you strong, firm and steadfast as you are going through these hard times.

But what about that word “restore”? Isn’t that saying after you’ve been beaten up and torn apart God will come along and kind of pick up the pieces and put everything back together again after the game is over? I don’t think that’s the point. It is helpful to hear the original Greek words that Peter wrote at the end of verse 10. The last 9 English words of that verse are translations of just 4 Greek words. They come in a short, sharp staccato series. They are a package, kind of like a boxer’s combination of punches. It sounds like this: *katartisei, sterixei, sthenosei, themeliosei*. You can hear the rhythm and rhyme of them that binds all of them into one package. It is Peter’s way of pounding an idea into our heads. The idea is that God will give us what we need to stand tall, unshaken in the middle of the storms that are assailing us.

That first Greek word could have that sense of restoring something after it is broken. It was used, for instance, of mending a broken bone. However, the word had some other uses and meanings. Paul used the exact same word in Ephesians 4:12 when he said that Christ has given some gifted people “to equip his people for works of service.” There the word meant to equip people. I think that’s what Peter intended here.

It begins with him equipping us, giving us what we need to endure and persevere. I have a regret that I felt again recently. Our son, Toby, still plays hockey once a week. He plays on Thursday nights when he doesn’t have to work. Toby is a goalie, and he is really good at it. He has played with former professional players and he has been told going back even to his college days that he was good enough to play at the Division I college level and possibly even professionally. What is remarkable about that is that he made himself into that good of a player pretty much all on his own. What brought this up is he is looking at buying new goalie pads. This reminded me of what we never did for him in his younger years. We never gave him good equipment. We gave him some that was terrible. In fact, I am embarrassed now over how bad it was. Good pads are high tech, light weight and expensive. We got him some old school, used, beat up leather pads that weighed about a ton and a half because we didn’t have the money for decent equipment. Our poor son had to use those things that had been out of style for 15 years. It had to be embarrassing for him, but more important, it kept him from playing as well as he could have. We also never got him any coaching. He had to learn all by himself. I console myself that it didn’t matter because he was meant to be a doctor, not a hockey player. But we didn’t equip him, because we couldn’t afford those expensive pads and costly coaching.

God does not do that to his children. He doesn’t skimp on the equipment, preparation and support they need, to not just survive the hard times, but to thrive. The first thing we need to know is that God promises that if we will trust him he will equip us, strengthen us, ground us so that we can deal with whatever life throws at us. God has not and will not abandon us. It is important for us to know that all the power and love of God is with us. He will equip us, and the equipment he gives won’t be the cheap stuff, old used stuff he bought at Play It Again. He gives us top flight equipment.

Notice verse 11. “To him be the power forever and ever.” What does that mean? I could understand “to him be the glory,” for we can give God glory, but we can’t give him power. He already has it. Grammar helps us with this one. Peter literally wrote, “To him the power for ever and ever.” There is no verb in the sentence. The translators thought this was a prayer so they supplied the verb “be.” However, I think this wasn’t a prayer, but a statement. It comes on the heels of the promise that God will equip us and make us strong and firm. I think the correct verb should be “is.” To him is the power forever. In other words, God has power, might and he has it eternally. He has had it since before creation and will have it without end. The point is he has more than sufficient might to enable us to stand firm in whatever may come our way. He is all powerful. Nothing is too great for him.

He gives us everything we need to stand firm and faithful. In Romans 8:37 after Paul talked about facing trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or the sword, he wrote, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” We don’t just get through it. We don’t just survive. We don’t just win. We more than conquer. We dominate. We win in a rout. We own those opponents. But we don’t have such impressive victories by our own awesome ability and strength. We do it through him who loved us, through the all powerful God who will equip us and strengthen us.

How does God strengthen us? Sometimes it is through his Word, just knowing the truth gives us strength. Sometimes it is through hope. Nothing is stronger than hope for enabling one to endure. Sometimes he uses other people to stand with us and encourage us. At times it is through his putting his strength in our souls. Psalm 46:1 says, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” Isaiah 40:29 says God, “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.”

In Psalm 73 the writer reflected on hard times he had been through. In verse 2 he said, “My feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold.” In verse 14 he said, “All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishment.” But in verse 26 he said, “My heart and flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” In his own strength he would fail, but God gave him the strength to endure. Laurie and I were recently reflecting on a terrible trial by fire that we went through when our first son, Joel, died. Laurie said that though it was crushing, though we had extreme grief, though it was confusing and incredibly hard, there was always a sense that God was with us despite all that happened. Some time after we went through that we were at a worship service in Fullerton at the end of which we briefly chatted with famous author and pastor, Chuck Swindoll. We knew Chuck, and he was aware of what had happened to us. In that brief conversation Chuck said something to Laurie she has never forgotten. He held her arms and said to her, “Laurie, God has put steel in your soul.” It was true. God equipped and strengthened us, and enabled us to not just survive that, but to actually conquer.

GOD CALLS US TO GLORY

This is a crucial component of understanding why and how to deal with the hardships of this life. As verse 10 says, in Christ God has called us to glory. Not just glory, but eternal glory. Why does that matter? We were created for glory. It’s part of being human, because it is part of being made in the image of God, who is glorious beyond comprehension. That desire for glory never goes away. It is present at all times.

Brian Robbins creates You Tube channels, especially for teenagers and “tweens.” In a recent article in *New Yorker* magazine he said, “The number one thing (kids) want is to be famous. They don’t even know what for.” They don’t know what they want to be famous for, they just want to be famous. Studies have shown that for today’s kids that’s the thing that is indeed most important to them.

What they want is glory. We all want that, but we interpret that as being noticed and acclaimed by other people. But our desire for glory, for approval and notice, is bottomless. No matter how much approval we get from people, it’s never enough. And all you have to do is listen to some famous people and you’ll figure out that being famous isn’t what we need at all. Actress and comedienne, Amy Schumer, recently said that she has found that “fame is not fun.” She said, “I’m just now learning that my dreams have been a sham…it’s actually not great and it only comes with pain.” Her dreams have come true. She is famous and successful in the eyes of the world, and she says the whole thing is an illusion.

Pastor J. R. Vassar has written a book titled *Glory Hunger: God, The Gospel And Our Search For Something More*. He wrote, “We are glory deficient people looking to other glory deficient people to supply us with glory…It is futile to look to other glory hungry people to fully satisfy our glory hunger, and doing so leaves our souls empty.”

God has called us to the glory that we need and were made for. It is not a transient, fading glory. It is eternal. Augustine said, “God destined us for an end beyond the grasp of reason.” Have you ever had that itch that wouldn’t go away, and no matter where you scratch you somehow don’t quite get it and make it stop? That’s like our glory hunger. We keep trying to scratch it, but nothing ever makes it stop. That’s because we want the glory that God has called us to. He has called us to share in eternal, divine glory. That is what we need and were made for.

This is crucial to understand because in those hard times such as Peter’s first century audience were enduring, it is common to get totally consumed by the hardships of right now. A crucial step in being able to have perspective on those sometimes painful things is to get our eyes off the “right now” onto the eternal and the glory we will have.

Recently our family had what Laurie called the 240 Birthday Party. We celebrated birthdays for Wesley, who turned 2, and Michael who turned 40. We had a dinner that we had to squeeze in between Toby getting off work at the hospital and bedtime for all the kids. As dinner was ending it was time for cake and singing “Happy Birthday.” Just as we were about to sing little 4 year old Cara objected because she was still eating her Dino chicken. She wanted us to wait until she was done before we sang. Unfortunately, she tends to eat at a glacial pace. We couldn’t wait because our narrow time window was closing. If we didn’t keep things moving we would quickly be climbing Mount Meltdown. So we sang the song, and Cara began to cry hysterically. She was totally traumatized by our singing “Happy Birthday” before she finished eating. She was inconsolable. Her Mom and Dad did manage finally to calm her down. But not before a storm of emotion.

Why did it matter whether we sang while she was still eating? I have no idea. For whatever reason, to her it was crucial that we not sing until she was done eating. Isn’t it interesting how kids at that age can decide that something so trivial is actually enormous and deeply traumatic? But what do you remember from when you were 4 years old? I don’t recall anything. What of all the things you experienced in those early years that seemed so momentous have mattered in the rest of your life? Has your life been forever scarred because one night you didn’t get to wear your mermaid pajamas to bed? The truth is that now, as an adult, you know that so many of those momentous, emotional events of childhood were momentary and trivial, and all that really mattered was ahead of you.

So it is with being destined for eternal glory. As we focus on that we are able to put our travails in perspective. Yes, right now this is hard, maybe even grievously painful. But we are destined for eternal glory so magnificent, so great, that we will forget about this little thing. In 2 Corinthians 4:16 Paul said we don’t lose heart in difficult times because we are being renewed day by day. Then in verses 17-18 he gave a great reason for not losing heart. “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Being called to glory gives us perspective. We look at what we can’t see yet, but we know what is real and is forever. Knowing we are called to glory we fix our eyes on what is unseen, rather than the immediate, difficult but ultimately not all that important thing that we can see.

GOD GIVES GRACE

Peter calls God the God of all grace. Grace is characteristic of God. In verse 12 Peter tells us that what he has written about, the gospel of Jesus Christ, “is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.” He tells us in the middle of the ordeals of this world we need to stand fast in God’s grace.

Grace is undeserved kindness. We understand that Christ dying for us to rescue us was a kindness of immeasurable value that we do not deserve. But what about the rest of what was happening in the lives of Peter’s readers? It is hard to see the kindness in all the hardship and suffering they endured. But we need to remember the many ways God has been unimaginably good and kind to us that we do not merit that Peter has mentioned in this letter. In 1:2 he said we were chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. In 1:3 he said we were given new birth into a living hope. In 2:9 he said he have become a chosen people, a royal priesthood. In 5:7 he said God cares for us. In 5:10 he said God has destined us for eternal glory. We don’t deserve any of that, and all of it far outweighs anything that happens in this life.

Dr. Larry Crabb wrote a book titled *The Pressure’s Off*, in which he made the point that pressure, futility and lack of joy and peace in our lives are the result of living in what he calls “the Old Way.” I would call that living by the Old Covenant, which is not living by grace, the core of the New Covenant. He made the point that the Old Covenant, the Old Way of living, includes two crucial errors that are common in our thinking. The first mistake is thinking that the ultimate good is to get the blessings of this life. This is what matters most. Crabb wrote, “The central obstacle to God’s life flowing in us and pouring from us is this: *We want something else more*…We want the blessings of a ‘better life’ more than we desire to draw near to Jesus.”

I read a true story told by a man named Dwight Nelson. The pastor of his church had a kitten that climbed a tree in his yard but then was afraid to climb down. He tried to coax it down, tried milk and treats to lure it down, but it wouldn’t budge. It was too scared. The tree wasn’t sturdy enough for the pastor to climb, but he thought he could bend the limb down far enough that he could grab the kitten. He came up with what seemed an ingenious plan. He tied a rope onto the tree and tied the other end onto his car. Then as he drove the car slowly away it pulled the tree down. He went very carefully, but just as he had the limb down almost low enough so he could reach the frightened kitty, the rope slipped off the tree. The limb sprang back up and launched the kitten into the air, over the fence and out of sight. He felt terrible. What had he done to the poor kitten? He looked for it, asked a few neighbors if they’d seen it, but he had no joy. All he could do was say, “Lord, I commit that kitten to you.” A few days later he ran into a church member in the grocery store and was surprised to see that she was buying cat food even though she hated cats. He asked her about that and she said, “You’re not going to believe this but it’s true.” Her daughter had been begging her for a cat, but she wanted no part of it. The girl wouldn’t give up, so the mom finally said, “I’ll tell you what. You ask God to give you a cat, and if he does I’ll let you keep it.” She then said, “I watched as my little girl went out in the back yard, got on her knees and asked God to give her a cat. I saw this with my own eyes. A kitten came flying out of the clear blue sky, paws outspread, and landed right in front of my daughter.”

That’s how we think we want life to be. There are things we want and need in this world right now. What we want is that God would do exactly what that little girl thought he did for her. Drop the things we want right out of the sky when we ask for them. That’s because we make that “Old Covenant” mistake. We want the blessings of this life right now, and want God to drop them in our laps.

That leads to the second mistake that the Old Way makes, and it’s a deadly one. We think if we obey the rules, God will give us the blessings we want. Deuteronomy 29:9 said, “Carefully follow the terms of this covenant so that you may prosper in everything you do.” That’s just what we think we want. Prosper in everything we do. There’s the formula. Follow the terms of the covenant, and God will give you everything you want right now.

We need to think about those two mistakes of the Old Way. The first one is to focus on this life and its blessings. It says that is all that really matters and that is what we most want and need. The second is to think we gain those blessings by obeying the rules God gives. Let’s think about that second error, then we will look at the first one. We have to ask, why did God send his Son into the world if he already had a workable system? If the solution for getting what we need most is to keep the rules, Jesus didn’t need to come here unless it was to harangue at us to do better. But he said that wasn’t why he came. He said he came to give his life as a ransom for us. If keeping the rules was the answer for us, he surely didn’t need to die the way he did.

His life and his message were about a completely new arrangement with God, one based on grace. Grace is about being given something we don’t earn or deserve. Jesus came because keeping the rules never worked. No one was ever able to do it, and no one ever will be able. The bar is set way too high for us.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the Old Way is it is vending machine religion. It turns God into a vending machine. You see what you want, put in the required coin and out pops the blessing. You don’t worship a vending machine. A vending machine serves you. This approach makes God our servant, just popping out what we want when we have the right capital to put into the machine. This is about as awful as theology can get. It puts us at the center of all things in the place of God, whose job in this system is to serve us and give us what we demand. That’s pretty much the error that Satan foisted on Eve in the garden of Eden.

However, another problem with the vending machine religion is we don’t have the required capital to put in the machine. We forget that no one was ever able to keep all the rules in the Old Covenant. Have you ever been in that situation where you really would like to get a snack or some drink out of a vending machine, but the cheapest items cost $2, and you only have 63 cents? You can’t afford what you want. That’s our problem with vending machine religion. We can’t afford it. That’s why Jesus came, because grace is our only hope.

Let’s also think about that first error, thinking that what we most need is the blessings of this right now world. This is what trips us up. If we need good stuff right now and God doesn’t give it to us, how can he say he loves us? He’s keeping from us what we need most. But what if that’s not correct? What if we need something else infinitely more?

In Ephesians 1:3 Paul wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every **spiritual** blessing in Christ.” The good news of Jesus Christ is that what we need most of all are those spiritual blessings. They are infinitely more important than the good things of this life. They are the things that make this life full, and our eternal future glorious. Something inside us says, “No, I want the good stuff right now and I want to have none of the bad stuff. This is what matters.” But that’s not true. Yes, it’s nice if life is comfortable and fun rather than painful and hard. But what if those aren’t the things that we actually need?

In the introduction I told you about my wealthy college friend. I talked to him on the phone a few years back. Many people would say he and his family had it all. But it wasn’t true. The money actually blew his family apart in tragic fashion. He ended up going through a divorce. He suffered several other tragedies that no amount of money, or power or status could ever help him deal with. He was like a living, breathing advertisement that the good stuff of this world isn’t the answer. What enabled him to endure, even over come the tragedies and hardships that have befallen him is the spiritual blessings of grace. It has been God’s love and strength, it has been the hope he has and the peace he has in Christ.

What we most need is to be connected to God, to be loved and accepted unconditionally by him, to be relieved of our guilt, to be able to be at peace with who we are, to have peace and joy, to know our lives have great meaning and purpose that is forever, and to have hope of life after death. There is nothing in this world that can give us those things.

If we get what we think we want, it won’t be what we actually need and want. It is common to want power, pleasure, money, praise and acceptance, health in this world. But what if you got all of that and were disconnected from God, felt guilty and had no relief of your guilt, had no meaning or purpose to life, had no peace, no joy, and you had no hope when faced with death. Is that really what you want?

We forget that the Old Covenant promises of abundance and a good life here were intended not to be the final goal, but only were pictures of the blessings that the New Covenant would bring, the spiritual blessings. What we need are the spiritual blessings. The others are nice. But it is possible to be fulfilled, at peace and joyful if you have the spiritual blessings but lack the good things of this life. It is not possible to be fulfilled, at peace and joyful if you don’t have the spiritual blessings no matter how much of this world’s stuff you have.

CONCLUSION

We won’t always understand the why of everything that happens. But what we need to know is that God has given us 3 crucial things to help us navigate it all and do it with peace and joy:

He equips us with all the power we need to stand firm in everything.

He gives us the hope of glory to keep us focused on what really matters.

He gives us the blessings we most need for life, and does it all by grace.

Jen Oshman is a wife, mom, former missionary, writer and speaker. Recently she wrote a blog in which she commented on the fact that President Biden had said every American who wanted to leave Afghanistan would be evacuated. The common reaction was, what American wouldn’t want to leave? She pointed out that there are those who don’t.

She wrote of a friend, a young woman who was in Afghanistan providing medical care as a missionary, and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. As things got more violent and threatening there both her sending agency and the US State Department urged her to leave. She said, “Please don’t make me leave. It would kill me if I have to leave.” She stayed. One day a Taliban terrorist came to the clinic where she worked, saying he needed treatment. But he had a gun hidden under a bandage. When he got in the clinic he pulled the gun out and opened fire. He killed a number of the Christian medical aid workers, including that young woman. Afterward the Taliban killer said he had to do it. He said, “If they kept doing what they were doing, then the whole country would believe in Jesus.” Oshman wrote, “That’s why there are Americans who don’t want to leave Afghanistan. They want the whole country to believe in Jesus.”

Many would say that young woman’s life and death were tragic, and in one obvious sense they were. But she was fully alive, living in dire circumstances, but eager, at peace, joyful, doing something she believed in, something that will matter forever. She was not afraid of what might happen because she had the hope of glory. Wouldn’t we all want to have that kind of strength, peace and significance? God may or may not give us the blessings of this world, but in Christ, in grace, he absolutely has given us what we need to have that kind of full, glorious life.