

# Leaving the Past Behind: A Sermon on 1 Peter 4:1-6

GREG W. FORBES

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**Greg W. Forbes** is the Head of the Department of Biblical Studies at Melbourne School of Theology, Melbourne, Australia. He earned his PhD from Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *1 Peter* in the Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (B&H Academic, 2014); co-author (with Scott D. Harrower) of *Raised From Obscurity: A Narratival and Theological Study of the Characterization of Women in Luke-Acts* (Pickwick Publications, 2015); and *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* in the Library of New Testament Studies (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000).

## INTRODUCTION

*Julius spent much of his time around the local temple. He was a trader, a merchant, and there were always crowds around the temple plying their trade and willing to do business. On Fridays when he had finished his day's work he enjoyed the weekly feast sacrificing to the local gods. There was certainly no lack of food and drink, and he and his friends would party long into the night being careful, of course, to pay homage to the relevant god or goddess. He also enjoyed the occasional time with the temple prostitutes.*

*But things changed. He met a man who told him about Jesus and the Christian faith. Although he would not admit this to his friends, Julius was dissatisfied with the Greek and Roman gods. It was confusing and not intellectually compelling. He needed to comprehend the reason for his existence and understand the purpose of the creation around him. What the man told him provided the answers he longed for. So he was baptized and became one of the Christ followers.*

*But this created an unexpected problem with his friends. He now avoided the temple feasts, no longer drank all night, and would not go to the temple prostitutes. His friends did not understand him, no matter how much he tried to explain it, and they started abusing*

*him and insulting his new way of life. His family were also extremely critical of him for abandoning the family religion.*

The Epistle of 1 Peter was addressed to people like Julius. They were suffering for their faith. Not suffering persecution from the governing authorities, but from friends and pagan neighbors who were upset that they no longer followed their former way of life.

Maybe you can identify with this. Possibly you have created tension in your family because of your faith in Jesus. They cannot grasp the necessity for a commitment like yours, nor for the reason for the ethical choices that you make. For those brought up in Christian families tension may still exist, but it originates from an antagonistic wider society. Peter writes for such people. They are to expect this response from unbelievers, look to Jesus as an example of unjust suffering, and commit themselves to God's care.

**THEREFORE, SINCE CHRIST HAS SUFFERED IN THE FLESH (4:1A).**

The sufferings of Christ are a key part of this letter. Obviously this is so because Christ's sufferings are central to the Christian faith. But the other reason lies in the situation that we have discussed above. Peter wants his readers to identify with Christ's example.

**ARM YOURSELVES WITH THE SAME RESOLVE (4:1B).**

The Greek verb *ἀντίσταμαι* was often used in a military context of taking up weapons for battle. Christian believers are to be resolute in imitating the resolve of Jesus. This does not mean that martyrdom is a mandatory requirement, but there must be a willingness to suffer if need be. It also involves mirroring the attitude of Jesus in the midst of suffering, an attitude which finds expression in a non-retaliatory response and a willingness to accept insults and abuse (2:21-25; 3:13-18; 4:12-19).

This is very hard to do. I find it hard not to retaliate even when I am in the wrong! I may not retaliate physically; my preferred means of response is sarcasm. But that response is not what Jesus wants.

*There were two brothers who constantly fought and argued. The older brother enjoyed a*

*fight and was jealous of the younger one and tried to provoke him. The younger brother just wanted to be left alone. He found it very hard to ignore his older brother's taunts and not to retaliate. But one day he decided that no matter what he would ignore the teasing of his brother. At first the older brother kept at it, but after a while he grew tired and went and played on his mobile phone. Later that day the older brother teased him again. But the younger brother, recalling what had happened earlier, steadfastly ignored him. The older brother became very angry that he was being ignored and struck the younger brother. But the younger one still did not retaliate and so the older brother went off to his room and sulked.*

Have you ever considered that not retaliating actually disempowers the offender? Look at the trial of Jesus; you get the impression that Jesus is really the one who is in charge. So non-retaliation is not only honoring to God, it is a subtle way of undermining the power of the aggressive person (3:15).

**BECAUSE THE ONE WHO HAS SUFFERED IN THE FLESH HAS CEASED FROM SIN (4:1C).**

This is a very difficult expression as the identity of “the one who has suffered in the flesh” is unclear. On the one hand, some consider this to be a further reference to Jesus, thus mirroring the opening clause. As the moral perfection of Jesus has already been mentioned several times in the letter (1:18; 2:22; 3:18) this can hardly be indicating that Christ reached a state of sinless perfectionism after his suffering. But it may be highlighting the fact that sin has been decisively dealt with in the sense of forgiveness, or that Christ has conquered the power of sin.

More likely, however, it is a reference to individual believers. But what does it mean? There is no warrant at all, either from this epistle or the rest of the NT, to regard suffering as a means for forgiveness or as leading to perfection of character. Rather, the sense is likely to be that those who suffer for their faith have, by definition, turned from a life of sin—and we see examples of such sin in the following verses. And, of course, the converse is also true. You are unlikely to suffer for your faith if a non-Christian lifestyle is more attractive to you than following Jesus.

**SO THAT YOU MAY NO LONGER LIVE THE REMAINING TIME IN THE FLESH BY HUMAN DESIRES BUT BY THE WILL OF GOD (4:2).**

An important qualification is needed at this point. Suffering for your faith in Jesus does not make you a more worthy Christian, and it does not mean that you will never sin again. But it does indicate a willingness to follow the cause of Jesus and leave behind a lifestyle of sin, no longer governed by sinful human desires but controlled by the will of God.

**FOR THE TIME HAS LONG PASSED TO ENGAGE IN THE WILL OF THE PAGANS, IMMERSSED IN VARIOUS ACTS OF RECKLESSNESS, CRAVING, DRUNKENNESS, REVELRY, CAROUSING AND LAWLESS IDOLATRY (4:3).**

*Julius recognized that in order to follow Jesus he would need to let go of a pagan lifestyle. Jesus was not just one god among many and he could not claim to be a follower of Jesus and continue with his temple practices. This was what his friends could not understand. Sure, it was okay to follow a particular deity—many people followed different Greek or Roman gods. But why do you have to be so exclusive, and why do you have to do stop living the way you used to and cut everyone off? They just didn't get it.*

*But Julius recognized that in terms of that style of life "the time is long past." He had sinned more than enough—it was time to move on.*

What past have you left behind? For me it may not be idolatrous religious practices, but it may be for some of you. The idolatry that we battle in Western Christianity is more often a subtle idolatry of various things that compete for our devotion. It may be sport. It may be materialism. It may be success in the business world. Take note of what controls your thinking. What is your default focus of attention? This may be an indication that all is not what it should be from a Christian perspective. But Peter insists that worship of Jesus must be kept pure. It is impossible to mix Christian faith with other religious or pagan practices and remain faithful to God.

Then there is the sin of looking back. Do you sometimes catch yourself looking back to a past life with some interest, maybe even affection? Jesus tells us that "those who put their hand to the plough and look back are not fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62), whereas the Second Epistle of Peter uses the image of a washed pig returning to wallow in the mud, or a dog returning to its vomit (2 Peter 2:22). But the time is past, long past!

**THEREFORE THEY ARE SURPRISED THAT YOU NO LONGER RUN HEAD-  
LONG WITH THEM INTO THE SAME FLOOD OF RECKLESS LIVING (4:4A).**

The picture is almost comic. Pagans running and plunging into a torrential stream. But this is not a stream of water. It is a stream of indulgence, wickedness and depravity.

The metaphor of flood is very real from time to time in Australia. In fact, as I write the eastern coast of Queensland and New South Wales is struggling to recover from the devastation wrought by Cyclone Debbie. Similar catastrophic flooding was caused by prolonged rain in the U.S. State of Louisiana in 2016.

What can we say about floods? (1) Floods create mess; the clean-up effort after a cyclone of this magnitude is immense. (2) Floods damage people's lives; many people have lost their homes in this event and only have the clothes they are wearing. (3) Floods are more dangerous than they look; we have all seen the footage of those who attempted to cross raging floodwaters but were caught in the torrent. (4) Floods also overtake the unsuspecting or the unprepared. There have been several warnings designed to stop a recent trend of tourists exploring the underground waterways of Melbourne. This is an extremely hazardous enterprise as just a small amount of rain can result in flooding of these waterways.

Wickedness and sin are no different. Sin creates mess and complicates people's lives. Sin damages lives; rarely does it only affect the person committing it. Sin also overtakes the unsuspecting and is definitely more dangerous than it may appear.

**AND SO THEY BLASPHEME (4:4B).**

The object of this "blasphemy" is ambiguous. On the one hand, there have been ample previous references that indicate a slandering of believers by those hostile to the Christian faith (2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:14). However, of the variety of terms used for this of verbal abuse, this word (βλασφημέω) is not one of them. Consequently, it is more likely that this refers to blasphemy directed towards God as a result of the astonishment and annoyance of people that their Christian neighbors no longer join them in sinful practices.

*Julius could identify with this. He found that his friends were not content to ridicule and insult him. In addition, they said derogatory things about Jesus and God because of the distinctive lifestyle of Christians.*

**THEY WILL GIVE AN ACCOUNT TO HIM WHO IS READY TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD (4:5).**

*Julius desperately wanted his friends to understand about Jesus and realized that God was willing to accept them and that Jesus died for all people. After all, hadn't he been like them just a short time ago?*

*But he was also realistic enough to know that not all would come to Christian faith. In that case they would still see God, but see him as judge. Nothing escapes his notice.*

The concept of judgment is not a popular concept in today's world and is one sure way to lose your audience very quickly! In our culture people believe that they are only accountable to themselves for their actions. Judgment is considered too harsh, and inappropriate for a God of love.

Yes, God is a God of love, but also a God of justice. He has given us the freedom to choose and our choices are significant. If people choose a sinful lifestyle, and want to live independently of God, then he gives them the freedom to do that. But there are consequences to be paid in the future.

Even as Christians we must give an account of our life and choices to God. Our salvation is not the issue, but we do have to answer for the choices that we have made. Paul says that we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). I would prefer for this to be a positive experience, rather than one of shame and regret.

**FOR THIS REASON THE GOSPEL WAS ALSO PROCLAIMED TO THE DEAD (4:6A).**

So far so good. But now things get really difficult! Who are "the dead"? Who proclaimed the gospel to them and why? Here we are confronted with several interpretive options. We will discuss three of these.

First, the reference is to the spiritually dead, who had the gospel proclaimed to them while they were alive. But this is not the meaning of "the dead" in

the previous verse and we should expect a correspondence in meaning given the clear linking of these terms. In addition, the idea of being “spiritually dead” is foreign to the thought of this epistle.

Second, it relates to the dead who hear the gospel in Hades, with this passage read in conjunction with 3:18-19 where Christ proclaims to the “spirits in prison.” However, the view of most commentators, correctly in my opinion, is that 3:18-19 relates to a proclamation of victory over evil spiritual powers. The language here in 4:6 is quite different and there is no sense here that Christ himself performs a proclamation. Furthermore, the idea that the dead receive a second chance finds no support in this epistle or the wider NT, and actually hinders the repeated exhortations in this epistle to stand firm in the face of suffering. Peter clearly expects a negative outcome for some at the final judgment (4:18).

Third, “the dead” are those who heard the gospel while alive and responded, but have since died. This is the best interpretation because it avoids the difficulties of the above two options and aligns with Peter’s repeated concern to encourage his readers that divine vindication awaits those who suffer for doing good (2:18-25; 3:8-12, 13-17, 18-21; 4:12-19; 5:8-10).

**THAT ALTHOUGH CONDEMNED IN THE FLESH BY HUMAN STANDARDS  
THEY MIGHT LIVE IN THE SPIRIT BY GOD’S STANDARDS (4:6B).**

Christians who have died may well have been viewed in one way, a negative way, by pagan society. Julius was well familiar with that. Christians were condemned as unsociable, different and even harmful to society. But from God’s perspective they are viewed in an entirely different matter.

Here is the challenge. What matters most to you? To receive a positive evaluation by others, or to receive a positive evaluation by God? It is easy to say the opinions of others don’t matter, but in many cases that is a lie. To be viewed positively by others is a part of our hard-wiring as human beings, however this has been distorted by the fall to the extent that it becomes an unhelpful obsession. As sinful human beings we are driven by other people’s perception of us. How else do we explain, for example, the exponential growth in cosmetic surgery?

The irony is that when we try too hard to get approval from other people we most often don’t get it anyway! Sin in one of its ugliest and most subtle

forms is to care more about people's perception of us rather than our standing before God.

### **SUMMARY OF 1 PETER 4:1-6**

Some of us may be able to relate to Julius. Converted from a pagan background. Left behind a pagan lifestyle, even an idolatrous lifestyle. And you may be the target of some abuse and insults because of that. God wants you to expect that this will happen, not to retaliate, and commit yourself, and those who mistreat you, to him.

Others of us, raised in a Christian environment, are also aware of the pressures to conform. We also need to recognize that Christian privilege is being eroded in the West. What were once Christian nations are now definitely secular and becoming increasingly antagonistic to Christianity. In this environment Christians must expect tension and ridicule and be prepared to follow the example of Jesus in the way we conduct ourselves in this society.

### **THE END OF ALL THINGS IS NEAR (4:7A).**

How do we understand a statement like this, given that 2000 years have transpired and we are still going strong? In fact, we have quite a few statements like this in the NT, statements that appear to expect the return of Jesus and the end quite soon.

We need to understand such statements with respect to the decisive moment in history of the coming of Jesus, and his death and resurrection. With the coming of Jesus the kingdom of God has been established; God's plan for the ages is coming to fulfillment. Seen in this light the end is always near because of the character of the time in which we live. So, these are not so much statements about how long to go until the end, but of the nature of the time in which we live. We live in the kingdom age, on this side of the cross and resurrection. All that remains is for God to complete his plan for creation.

In verses 7b-11, notice what Peter says should be the consequences of living near the end. It is not to engage in speculation regarding signs of the times. It is not to write and publish fiction books based on fanciful interpretations of what might happen. It is not to opt out of life and pack your bags for eternity. Rather, the consequences he lists are four:



### **1. Be vigilant for prayer (4:7b).**

Prayer is a crucial part of maintaining a relationship with God. How can you have a proper and growing relationship with someone that you don't talk to? It is important that believers are not distracted by suffering, or by anything else for that matter, and contact with God through prayer be lost.

### **2. Love one another deeply (4:8a).**

Love for fellow believers has been a constant exhortation throughout 1 Peter. Persecuted Christian communities, indeed all Christian communities, need to stick together otherwise they will disintegrate. We need lots of encouragement from each other, and need to give a lot of encouragement to others if we are going to prosper in the Christian life.

What, however, does Peter mean by the statement "love covers a multitude of sins" (4:8b)? This saying may well draw on Proverbs 10:12, but the precise way in which sins are *covered* is unclear. At the outset, we should rule out any understanding that sins can be atoned for, even in part, by a human act. This finds no support elsewhere in this epistle, and contradicts previous passages where Christ suffers for human sin (2:21-24; 3:18). This leaves three main possibilities:

(1) The sins are the sins of the person who is showing love, with the idea that while love is being expressed sin is not.

(2) The sins are the sins of the person who is being loved, in the sense that love can keep a person from straying into sin.

(3) *Cover* is used in the sense of *forgive* (cf. Ps 32:1), with the sense that love always forgives the other. Love *covers* offences in the sense that it minimizes wrongs by refusing to take offence. This fits with Peter's repeated insistence on a non-retaliatory response (2:23; 3:9), and is probably the best option.

### **3. Show hospitality (4:9).**

In the early church individual Christians used their homes for corporate meetings and also to support itinerant teachers. Hospitality may have been difficult due to the extra stresses this would bring during times of potential persecution. Yet hospitality has always been a defining mark of Christians and must continue to be so today in an age where individuality threatens to dampen a sense of corporate solidarity.

**4. Serve God and the Christian community by exercising the gift you have been given (4:10-11).**

Peter does not provide an exhaustive list of gifts here but gives some examples. What is clear is that each person has received a gift and it is the responsibility of each believer to find out what that gift is and employ it for the good of all. It is simply not the job of the pastor or minister to do everything in the church. This leads to serious problems including burnout for the pastor and a lack of spiritual growth for the congregation. Christian growth occurs not only by knowing but by doing, and serving is a crucial component of learning to follow Jesus faithfully. The role of the pastor is to be a facilitator for the growth of the Christian community, to help people discover their gifts and to use them effectively.

**CONCLUDING REFLECTION**

So friends, just like the original recipients of this important letter known to us as 1 Peter, we live in the shadow of the end of all things. This should enable us to get a proper perspective on difficulties we encounter for our faith and witness for Jesus. It must motivate us to a distinctive Christian lifestyle that is not some crass mixture of Christianity and pagan or secular practices. We need to be vigilant, prayerful, and supportive of those in the Christian community, showing love and exercising the gift we have been given.

Finally, Peter's conclusion of this section of the letter provides an over-arching motto for the life we seek to live as followers of Jesus today:

*... in everything may God be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and power forever and ever. Amen.*