

What Should We Wish For?

I Peter 1:3-12

What should we wish for?

At the beginning of one of his sermons,¹ the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard asks, what is the one thing we ought to wish for the people we love—a friend or spouse, a sibling or child? I'm sure many things come to mind. We would want for them success in their work or calling—although we know that our careers and endeavors go through ups and downs, cycles of struggle and prosperity. We would wish for them comfort and loyalty from a community, small group of friends, or late—although we know that inevitably there will be times of pain and disappointment at the hands of those who like ourselves, unsteady in love and loyalty. We would certainly want health for them, but we know about the weakness and unpredictability of the body, and that with the advancing years unhealth will come by degrees. Wishing all these things and more for those whom we love is natural, although we would probably also say it is emotionally draining, for there is so much we want for those we love, and our wanting is weighed down by the knowledge that hopes like success, health, and relational harmony will be only partially realized in the course of a normal life. But is there one thing above others that we should desire for those we love, that we should pray for, that would somehow draw up all these others things into it? Is there a one necessary thing, as Jesus says to Martha, when we love another person and see before them the uncertain landscape of life?

Trials of Many Kinds

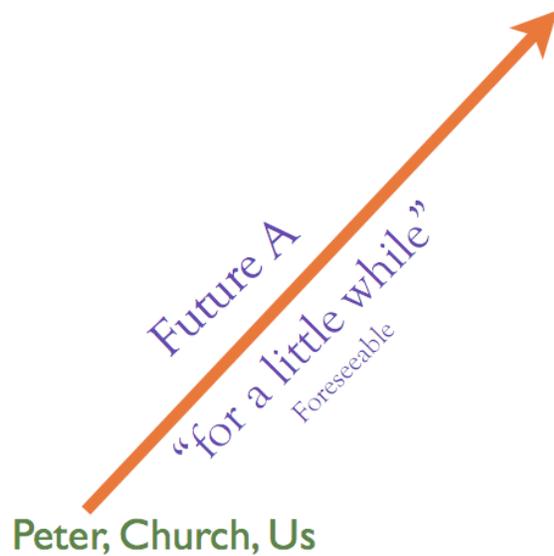
The epistle of 1 Peter is a letter written to churches in several regions of Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. In this opening to his letter, he writes to encourage them, for he acknowledges in verse 6 that they are experiencing trials of many kinds-- “many colored trials” as another translation puts it. Historians now think these were not yet the trials of martyrdom that would come to early Christians. Rather these trials were those that come with being “resident

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, “The Expectancy of Faith” in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, Trs. Edward V Hont and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990) 7-29.

aliens” — “exiles” as Peter puts it—those whose commitment to Christ has made them outsiders in their towns, and those who may literally be living as foreigners—forced into exile from Rome that would regularly banish non-conformists to the remote regions of the empire like Galatia, Cappadocia, and Pontus. From the hints we get of these persecutions (1:6; 2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:12, 16), they were probably experiencing suspicion, malicious talk, false accusations, and the frequent and personal social ostracism that would daily affect their social standing, opportunities for their families, their treatment by authorities, their ability to find work, and their future security. For a people suffering these kinds of trials, there is much to wish for. What, then, does Peter hold out to them? What does he want most for them? In a word, he calls it “faith” —that which in verse 7 he says is “of greater worth than gold.” Given how well money often works to improve our place in the world, that is quite a statement.

The Two Futures

To increase their faith, Peter distinguishes between two versions of the future. The first we might call Future 1 or Future A. Peter refers to Future A when he speaks of the “little while” in which they now have to “suffer grief” (v. 6).



This “for a little while” is the future that runs from the present to the foreseeable future—that which I am *now* experiencing, and which stretches out before me. In some cases, this “little while” may have a visible end, which usually means I have some control over it. Perhaps a job change can take me out from under a discriminatory boss, or an abusive relationship. In other cases, we can do nothing—the trial is bigger than we are. It mean, as it would for these Christians, changing a whole culture. In this case, the trials of future A seem to stretch really as far as their *human* eye can see, and cause us to doubt whether we will ever get the good that we seek.

This is what a Trial Does

You see, that is what a trial does: it makes it uncertain whether we will secure the particular goods that we seek. All us live our lives with good things in view, and much of our activity is aimed at

preserving or acquiring these. These are often *good* “goods” : meaningful and gainful work, flourishing relationships, friends, a spouse or children, respect and kindness from those we meet, and—as we said before—health and a life generally in which our needs are met. Our vision of these comes with an expectation of joy. If these are *good* “goods” than that is how it should be.

Now, what trials do is they come like a dark cloud, obscuring our path to these. “For a little while” all is uncertain. Will we get the goods we seek? When money becomes scarce, we ask, will we get the good of being able to provide for those we love. When sickness comes, we wonder will we ever get to rest in health again, without pain, without worry, without wondering? When relationships fail, we wonder, will mine be a life of loneliness? Now rather than joy, we have forethoughts of grief and depending on how important these are for us, we will experience anxiety: will we get the goods we seek?



If the trials are severe enough or last long enough, then two things begin happening to our view of reality. First, the trial makes it like Future A will last forever; in our minds, it becomes a permanent and immovable reality. Future A becomes *the* future. Second, we feel lonely, because not only have we been unable to climb out of the pit, but also no one has been able or willing to pull us out. It is why the Psalmist asks, “where will my hope come from?” (Ps. 121:1) It doesn’t seem like it will come from anywhere or anyone. As a result, we begin to feel anonymous. This is why it is good to visit people in need. Although we cannot always solve their problems, it helps alleviate the feeling of abandonment that tempts us in a time of trial.

I am sorry for dredging up these feelings, but these feelings and perceptions would have been tempting to the early Christians to whom Peter writes. You see, the culture around these churches had no hope to offer them. The Greek view of the afterlife was bleak, if people believed in an

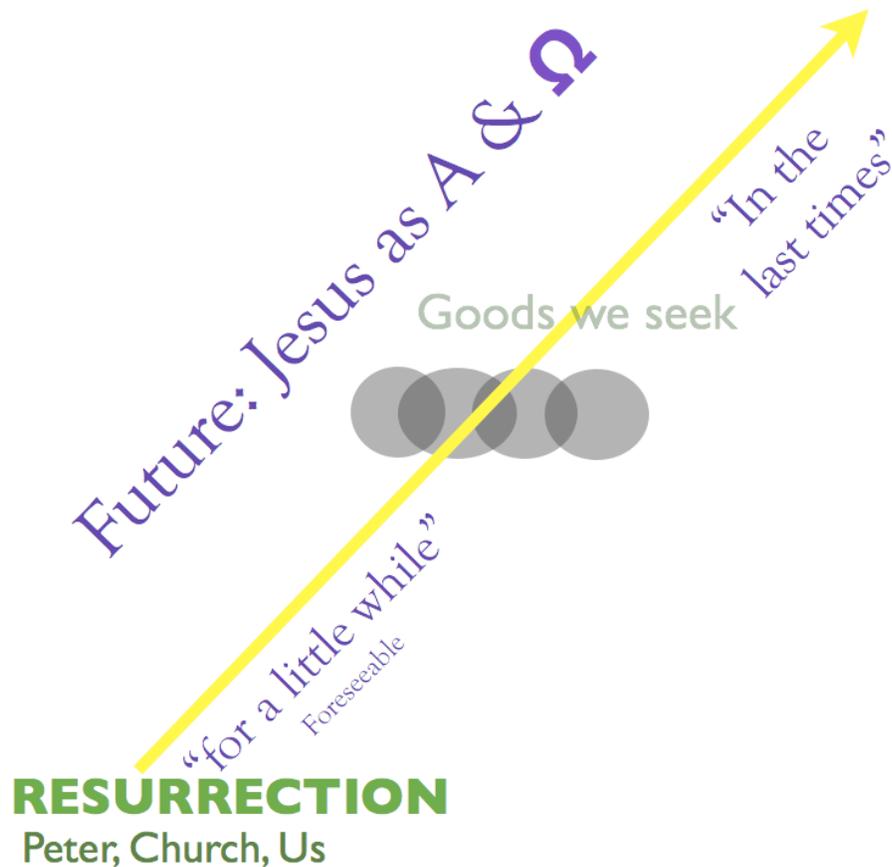
afterlife at all. The traditional gods were fickle and could not be counted on, and in the end, it pretty much amounted to a materialistic view of the world not unlike today—where what you see (the material world) is what you get, no more. Future A, with all its uncertainty and difficulty is all you have to work with. I think our modern world has a similar view. Most people, if they allowed themselves to sit still long enough, might acknowledge that live their lives over an abyss of long-term meaninglessness and hopelessness. Perhaps the key difference in the digital age, however, is that one doesn't have to sit still or look down. A steady stream of screens, glittering images, pleasures and, sometimes, substances offer us a kind of pseudo-buoyancy.

What Peter reminds these Christians, however, is that Future A—with its difficulty and uncertainty—is not even close to being the whole picture. There is another future—Future Omega—that has none of this uncertainty. He calls this future, “the last times,” and “in the last times,” the *good* goods—including the greatest good, God himself—are unequivocally secure. Future Omega has the legal sturdiness of an “inheritance” ; it cannot “perish, spoil or fade” (vs. 4)--which is what time normally does to merely human hopes. This future is “guarded” by God himself—the one person whom you *would* want securing the future.



It's important to say here that Peter's faith in this future is not a vague abstraction, not merely a wish. He's already experienced it. This future had a definite time and place beginning in Peter's past. With the voice of experience, he says to them, you've been "born into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3). Peter knows the difference between a dead hope and a living hope. In the 2 days after Christ's death, Peter along with Jesus' other followers, saw a Future A filled only with disappointment, meaninglessness, possible exile, and persecution. And this was not going to be "for a little while"; Christ's undeniable death had dealt a deathblow to their hopes. But then the unimaginable happened. Everything was reversed. Jesus rose from Future A and inaugurated Future Omega. If *that* now is possible and *that* now is the plan for all who receive him, then future A has swallowed up in future Omega. (SLIDE

12) It turns out that Jesus is the alpha and omega. This new future has already begun with the resurrection of Christ.



You see, the battle has been won. There is that great moment in many films when our heroes are surrounded by enemy. They are outnumbered, and there is no way out. There is nothing to do but despair. And then suddenly, a bigger picture emerges. It turns out that the encircling enemy has itself been encircled by another, greater, and more powerful force. They had been there all the time, and only now emerge from the brush to reveal that what appeared as defeat was in fact victory lying in wait. So for us, God has encircled with his future the littler future that we took for the whole.

My wife at a certain moment in her novel reading will decide its time to turn to the novel's last pages to see how it ends. As a kind of narrative ruler-follower, I cannot allow myself to do

that, but it is certainly true that an ending can and does change our view of everything that came before. In the case of good endings, knowing the conclusion can allow us to endure the uncertainties with a kind of grace. What we may lose in suspense, we gain in peace. When it comes to Christian life, knowing the “ending” of our narrative (actually, “World without end, Amen.”) is critical, for it is the larger story that changes the view of our own stories. It lends a light, if not always lightness, to the bad as well as the good. This light is the glory God, victory present and lying in wait.

This does not mean that we as Christians live only in some future beyond our lives. We do not want to be, as G.K. Chesterton has said, so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. No, we are to be present to the pains, to the grief, to the goods we lack but still seek. Christians are not stoics. Peter himself acknowledges the “grief” that these trials have brought his brothers and sisters, and in naming it, he validates it.

But like sailors trying to make their ways through storms, we do not just look down at the waves. Although we are very aware of it, and though our hearts sometimes beat with the adrenaline caused by their force, although we are active in managing the rigging, in securing the deck—still every sailor knows you have to keep looking at the stars which are the fuller reality and which point the

way forward.



What difference does this make in the present? Well, the temptation in a time of trial is to sin. Throughout this letter, Peter will warn these Christians not to fall into what he calls the “passions.” Why are these a temptation especially during these times? It is because, in hopelessness, the only things you have are your pleasures and the goods of Future A, which you will cling to fiercely, even sinfully. You see, sin is a kind of despair. People who have given up on any other future now must exhaust themselves in a steady stream of mere wishes, distractions and indulgences.

But for the Christian, it is *better to suffer than to sin* if it comes to that, for this suffering reminds us to run to Christ, the alpha and omega, the source of our joy, who walks with us from the present into a future guarded for us. We need to let suffering have its way to faith, leading us to

rehearse, return to, or—in Eugene Peterson’s words-- practice resurrection. For, because of the resurrection, there is a rumbling bass note of joy through whatever other noise there is in our lives.

When Peter speaks of such faith to these Christians, he speaks of the present:

“Though you have not seen him, you love him;
and even though you do not see him now,
you believe in him

and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (v.8)

This joy comes from a faith that is nothing other than increasing clear vision of the reality both present and future, which God holds and will one day make plain to all. And believe me, this faith and its fruit is only be ours to rejoice in, but *will* be noticed amid a hopeless generation. It is not so much our strengths and successes that will set us apart, as our peace—and dare I say—joy amid suffering. “In all this,” Peter says, “You greatly rejoice” (v.6).

It’s unclear, even from the grammar, whether Peter suggests in verse 8 that these Christians *are* rejoicing (they get it!) or *are to rejoice* in this future. This joy may be experienced by some to whom he is writing, and for others, it may be something that they are straining to see. Most of us are somewhere in between, and how we grow in faith and live faithfully within this view is what the rest of this letter will help us see.

But I want to present, for now, one image of resting in this present-future which God holds. Wendell Berry is a Christian, who is also a farmer, and as such necessarily watches annually the cycles of life, death and rebirth in the world. He also experiences the vagaries of weather, disease, pollution and political trends that make life difficult and even dangerous for those who live on the land. But in a recent interview with Bill Moyers, Wendell Berry said, “the world is, is maintained every day by the same force that created it. It’s an article of my faith and belief that all creatures live by breathing God’s breath and participating in his spirit. And this means that the whole thing is holy.”² In other words, all is held and held together by God.

² <http://billmoyers.com/segment/wendell-berry-on-his-hopes-for-humanity/>

For Berry, this is a grace and truth that is not “out there,” but something we can rest in now, in the present, amid “many colored trials.” In Berry’s poem, we feel the uncertainty and the temptation to despair. And yet the peace of “wild things” and the presence of still water echo a Psalm 23 world where a shepherd will ultimately lead us and goodness and kindness follow us all the days of our lives. God’s glory, like “day-blind” (daytime) stars may not always be fully visible, but are nevertheless there, “waiting with their light.” And so ultimately, this grace of the world—which is God’s grace—is the ground of our daily lives in which we can rest.

This is Wendell Berry’s *The Peace of Wild Things*:

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
 and I wake in the night at the least sound
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the peace of wild things
 who do not tax their lives with forethought
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars
 waiting with their light. For a time
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

--Wendell Berry

Where amid the difficulties of your life, do you need to practice resurrection-- to rest in grace of this world and its future into which Christ each day leads?