

WHAT REFERENCE IS MADE IN THE BOOKS STUDIED IN UNIT E TO PERSEVERENCE IN SUFFERING AND HOW DO THE VARIOUS WRITERS ENCOURAGE THEIR READERS?

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Module: 1002

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Date: 3/1/04

1 Introduction

The books of Unit E – Hebrews, the general letters and Revelation – were written at a time when Christians were facing unprecedented persecution by the Roman authorities, intent as they were on finding scapegoats, or, later, enforcing emperor worship. Accordingly there is extensive reference to suffering in these texts, with encouragement to endure.

2 Perseverance and conduct in suffering

Perseverance in suffering is the main topic of the letter of 1 Peter, while Hebrews, James and Revelation also make extensive references. The intensity of suffering referred to varies from relatively mild where pagans “heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4) to severer “painful trials” (1 Peter 4:12) of organised state persecution. At times, the persecution is in the past as in Hebrews 10:33 “Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution” and other times future prediction as for the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:10 “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”

There are various directions as to conduct when persevering under persecution. As Jesus would do, Christians must be obedient to God and live a holy life as they face persecution; 1 Peter 1:15 “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do”. Furthermore, we are urged to care for fellow Christians suffering for their faith as in Hebrews 13:3 “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Practical advice to care for fellow Christians in distress also has an application to periods to persecution, as 1 Peter 4:9 “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”

Those suffering persecution are to seek to convince or even convert their persecutors to Christianity, 1 Peter 3:15-16 “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” In speaking mildly to persecutors, Christians follow Jesus’ example, 1 Peter 2:23 “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Christians must leave God to dispense justice as in 1 Peter 2:9 “the Lord

knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment”.

God’s justice in Revelation 16:6 “for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.” has a deeper significance as echoing the plagues of Egypt, which foreshadowed the salvation of God’s people and the grant of the Promised Land. Revelation promises something greater for those who hold firm to their faith – the New Heaven and New Earth from which evil is banished, discussed further below.

3 A warning to persevere

A point of warning to persevere rather than encouragement is the issue in Hebrews of whether there is a risk of loss of salvation to born-again Christians who recant – perhaps former Jews in the Roman church who sought to avoid Nero’s persecution by renouncing belief in Christ. This is certainly a possible interpretation of Hebrews 10:29 “How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” James 5:19-20 also talks of the dangers of backsliding and urges Christians to recover those drifting from the faith “if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

4 Encouragement in suffering from the present and the past

A good starting point linking perseverance to encouragement is James’ reference to joy in suffering at the outset of his epistle (1:2-4) “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” We in other words should welcome suffering and persevere under it because it will develop our maturity as Christians. Hope will emerge from perseverance as shown in 1 Peter 1:3 “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope.... though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” 1 Peter 1:7 goes on to stress that the trials should be welcomed as they show the strength of our faith in that they “have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even

though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed”

It is promised that the trials will be short in 1 Peter 1:6 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” To some extent, the texts suggest that God himself permits the suffering as a form of discipline, as Hebrews 12:7-8 “Endure hardship as discipline”. Hardship permitted by God proves that God regards us as his sons, see Hebrews 12:8 “God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.” On the other hand, the role of Satan in the persecution is stressed in Revelation 2:10 “the devil will put some of you in prison to test you.” There are interesting parallels with the introduction to Job where Satan was authorised by God to test Job’s faith.

We are given the encouraging example of the prophets and others of the Old Testament who also suffered for their faith, as in James 5:10-11 “Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.” Job, the readers are reminded, had all his wealth restored. In Hebrews 12:1 we are seen as running a race in persecution with the heroes of the Old Testament cheering us on “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us”

5 Future blessings for suffering

More important still is the blessing to be obtained for following Christ’s example of suffering for the good of others; 1 Peter 2:20-21 “if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” And in 1 Peter 4:13-14 “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

There is also a promise of specific reward from God in James 1:12 “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” Or similarly in Hebrews 10:36 “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” In the vision of Revelation the souls of those slain in persecution are seen in the very heart of heaven, under the altar, Revelation 6:9 “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” Their place of honour is further shown in Revelation 7:14-15 “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.”

Indeed it is stressed that the fallen will be gloriously reunited with Christ as his bride at the wedding of the lamb in Revelation 19:7-8 “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)” The New Jerusalem is explicitly the place where those who have suffered are comforted in Revelation 21:4 “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

6 God’s future justice

Christ’s imminent return will foreshadow God’s justice. Promises of the “parousia” abound as encouragements in these books, as Revelation 3:11 “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” Impatience of some Christians is countered by 2 Peter 3:8-9 reference that “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” Delay shows God’s mercy and patience; “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Indeed, vindication of the persecuted church at the time the books were written is a central theme of Revelation seen from the “preterist” point of view. The book emphasises that God is in ultimate control of events, even as evil appears to triumph, with the pattern of the future being seen in terms of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. His victory is certain and the world is shown not to belong forever to the forces of evil. For example, torments are unleashed which bear on unbelievers. God’s chosen people – the woman clothed with the sun

– are protected from Satan. Believers killed under persecution will play a role in the defeat of Satan, Revelation 12:10-11 “For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

The climax of Revelation offers tremendous encouragement as Jesus returns on a white horse and Satan is overthrown with the beast and his prophet (symbolising Rome) as in 20:10 “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Of course, the preterist view is not the only interpretation of Revelation and the book certainly retains a particular relevance whenever Christians are subject to unjust trials for their faith – as well as giving a basis for all our future hopes.

7 Conclusion

We have shown that the last books of the Bible offer tremendous encouragement to suffering Christians. Sadly, these references are all too topical given the “suffering church” in many countries today, including North Korea, Sudan, Indonesia and China. Indeed, reports emanating from those beleaguered churches refer to the strengthening they obtain from scriptures such as these. There is also the paradox that churches that are persecuted appear to grow more strongly and become more Christ like than do those in easier pastures like the UK¹.

¹ Lambert, China’s Christian Millions, 186-187

References

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