

Second Sunday of Easter – Epistle

At God's Mercy

I Peter 1:3-9

Second Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

I Pet 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

DIAGNOSIS: Inheriting Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Sufferings: Yes; Trials of Faith: No*

Like the original recipients of this letter, we so easily deceive ourselves into believing we experience our own so-called

trials of faith-as if our every suffering, whether deserved or not, is somehow our cross to bear. Seldom does it dawn upon us – except, perhaps, after Easter – that our sufferings are mostly indistinguishable from the sufferings of everyone else, even or especially the sufferings of unbelievers. Seldom if ever does it occur to us that we bear, not the cross, but the responsibility; not as a trial to test our faith (we wrongly presume, for worthiness before God), but a trial in the strict sense, that we ourselves are on trial for who and what we are: sinners who sin.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Perishable Faith
Deceiving ourselves is so easy, so natural! That is, if we want to live without the pall of death hanging over us. The life we seek to secure, however, is a life placed on trial by God (through God's witting or unwitting agents). We are indeed self-deceived if we believe we can somehow escape the suffering and death that claims us all with finality. Our very perishable nature proves that the god we stake our poor life upon is merely our selves (or "souls" 1:9, the whole person). What a disappointing hope we have when such our life is based on such misplaced faith! Sin is unrelenting in its deception.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Death's Necessity
Not only are we deceived; not only is our natural faith nullified! Death necessarily comes upon us as God's righteous judgment over our "souls," the life for which we are on trial. God has this against us: that we trust in ourselves and our own feeble powers rather than in the One who created the heavens and the earth. It is right that God should deign to put an end to us! More than being right, however, God has another purpose. Death is required – absolutely so-not merely to demonstrate our misplaced faith and to put an end to it, but to "make room for faith [in Christ]" (M. Luther).

PROGNOSIS: Inheriting Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Unrequired Mercy

God's "great mercy," that is, Christ's "resurrection from the dead" (1:3), comes to us as a sheer, undeserved and thus unrequired gift. Like our creation, our salvation need not be! We are at God's mercy. God is not required to lift death as the final judgment for our misplaced faith. But, "Blessed be God the Father" (1:3), God's mercy-by-faith is "great" precisely because God the Son cancels God's judgment of death – not by some inner necessity but by the will of God to be mercy-full to those who believe in Christ. God's merciful act is both absolutely necessary and wholly sufficient for our salvation. Christ/Mercy/Salvation is not required of God but freely given. Indeed, the greatness of God's mercy is the greatness of Christ hanging upon a cross (in apparent weakness), exchanging his "imperishable, undefiled, unfading" life (1:4) for ours.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Genuine Faith

The undeserved, unrequired, mercy of God, that is, Christ himself, is what genuine faith calls a "living hope" (1:3). Such faith, like the One for whom it is named, is a new creation of God born out of the void of all expectations, from the weakness of the cross, "from the dead" (1:3), a "new birth" (1:3). There is room for such faith only in Christ who has death behind him. Such faith (or "love [for Christ]" 1:8) is not in what can be seen (that is, ourselves and our own powers), but in the One who is "not seen" (1:8) and who creates out of nothing. Until that time, known only to God "when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1:7) in unambiguous glory, "genuine faith" (1:7) can only point to the cross and to God's mercy there incarnate, honoring God in thankfulness and praise.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – The Outcome

The final outcome of our faith is as certain as the resurrection

of Jesus Christ; nothing else. And because our faith rests in nothing else, our lives (which are destined for death) continually test our faith's genuineness in every way and manner imaginable. For death confronts us on every side as the only reality. But now the "various trials" (1:6) presented to us by Death confront a "living hope" (1:3) undeterred by any death. Insofar as we are newly born children of God, such trials and tribulations only serve to make us stronger in faith and love, for they confirm (in the corruption they sow) the necessity of Death's own final death, and simultaneously also the hope of our own unrequired resurrection. For these two reasons, the saints of God can "rejoice with an indescribably and glorious joy" (1:8), even in the sharp teeth of suffering and death.