

1 Peter 1: Life-Changing Events

For Madame Bovary in Gustave Flaubert's famous novel, "the future was an unlighted corridor with a stoutly locked door at the end of it." That's what life seemed like to me when I was 11 years old. For it was then that my father was killed in a factory accident. That event chewed up the life I'd known and spat it out. It was my father, the person who was more precious to me than anyone else on earth. I could not treat his death with indifference, and dismiss it with a casual shrug of the shoulders. My emotional and psychological world was shaken to the core; my very being felt like it was being torn apart. But the consequences of his death were not merely felt in my private little world. There were ramifications in every area of our lives. We had to move house. My mother had to work. We kids (there were four of us) were sent off to boarding-school. Life took on a completely new shape. Later my mother remarried. My new father turned our lives upside down again. He took us out of boarding school; he took my mother away from running the pie-and-peas café for truckers; he took us away from home. He took us into a whole new world; through Europe, the Middle East and SW Asia to New Zealand.

Sometimes our lives are turned upside down by something that happens in history. An event takes place in the world we know and our lives can never be the same again. Peter repeatedly speaks about the radical impact upon our lives of the greatest set of events which have ever taken place in human history: the death of Christ and his resurrection. Take 1:10-12, for example. In verse 10 we read that God's great purpose in history is to give to his people a wonderful new life which Peter calls "salvation". Thousands of years ago God, through his Spirit, made this known through his spokespeople, the prophets. But their knowledge was very sketchy and very patchy. Did you read that the New Age Psychic Fair was cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances? The prophets didn't know the time or circumstances when all they foresaw would take place, but they didn't cancel out. They did know that in the future God's children would experience the greatness of God's grace in a completely unprecedented manner. They knew also this depended on another set of events: the Messiah, that is, "Christ", must suffer and then enter his glory (verse 11).

My father's death and the entrance of a new father into the family were the two major events which transformed the whole nature of my life as a child. It is the death of Jesus Christ and his entrance into glory which now turns your life and mine upside down. We must recapture the importance of Christ's death and resurrection because it is the key to living a transformed life. Over and over again Peter takes us back to the death and resurrection of Christ. He was shaken inside out and then reshaped by the impact of these events on his own life. He writes as one who witnessed Christ's sufferings and who is fully sure of sharing in Christ's glory (5:1). He could not forget these events if he tried, anymore than I can forget the death of my father and the coming of a new father into my life.

But when my father died not one of you was aware of the upheaval which took place in my life. When a new father walked onto the stage of my life none of you were conscious of how this would radically change the whole course of my life. It was not your father who died, but mine. The events which occurred were historical events - they really happened - but they were only of intense relevance to me, not to you.

Many of us have read the obituary columns in the newspaper, but most names in that ever-long list of the deceased have next to no impact upon us. Sadly, for many they might as well have read about Jesus' death in a newspaper obituary column given how little his death really means to them. At best it is as interesting to them as thinking about 1066 and the time King Harold got shafted in the eye, when he was fighting William the Conqueror. The death of Christ has a certain interest value but it does not impact upon their lives. Even more sadly there are many who call themselves Christians who seem to be just as unaffected by the death and resurrection of Christ.

In her award winning book, *Moon Tiger*, Penelope Lively tells the story of Claudia Hampton. Claudia at one point reflects on her life:

Mother. Let us take, for a moment, Mother. Mother retired from history. She withdrew, quite simply. She opted for a world of her own creation in which there was nothing except floribunda roses, ecclesiastical tapestry and some changeable weather. She read only the West Dorset Gazette, Country Life and the periodicals of the Royal Horticultural Society. Her greatest anxieties were concentrated on the vagaries of the climate. And unexpected frost could cause mild consternation. A bad summer was matter for gentle complaint. Fortunate Mother. Sensible, expedient Mother. On her dressing table stood a photograph of Father, trim in his uniform, eternally young, his hair recently clipped, his moustache a neat shadow on his upper lip; no red hole in his stomach, no shit no screams no white singing pain. Mother dusted this photograph every morning; what she thought as she did so I never knew.

In 1:18-19 Peter takes us back to the history upon which our Christian lives are founded. He reminds us, "*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefather, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*" What picture does Peter give us of Jesus? Trim in his uniform, eternally young, hair and beard neat and freshly washed, no red holes in his hands and feet, no gash in his side, no humiliation, no agony? No! Peter does not have a romanticised memory of Jesus. In 5:1 he tells us that he was "a witness of Christ's sufferings". He was there. He saw the horror of the cross. He saw the life-blood of Christ draining away. I was in Lahore, Pakistan, travelling in a rickshaw (a three-wheeled motorised taxi). At one point we slowed where a man had been knocked off his bicycle, lying dead in a pool of blood. It was an ugly sight. Some of you have seen far worse. Peter could never forget what he saw on the day Jesus blood flowed for us. Unlike Claudia Hampton's mother he does not try to shut out unwelcome memories.

Repeatedly in this epistle Peter reminds us of the terrible sufferings of Christ on our behalf. At the very outset of the epistle God's chosen people are identified as those who have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. We must not treat the blood of Christ as something from which we keep our distance. Many Christians act like Claudia Hampton's mother. They fill their often middle-class world with nice, respectable things. They have retired from history, or at least are semi-retired. The death of Christ is treated as a romantic thing, like the death of Gunga Din. But the shocking sufferings of Christ are of central importance to everything Peter says in this epistle. We've already learnt the Old Testament prophets were aware of the importance of the sufferings of Christ (1:11). Peter also speaks of Christ as the one rejected by men (2:4, 7); of how Christ's sufferings leave us an example to emulate (2:21ff); how Christ "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (2:24a); how by his wounds we are healed (2:24b); how Christ died for sins once for all to bring us to God (3:18); of his

peerless attitude when he suffered in his body (4:1); and of the way in which we participate in the sufferings of Christ (4:13). Which photograph of Jesus do you dust every morning? What picture of Jesus do we have in our minds?

Does the fact that Jesus died and rose again really make any significant difference to your life? In what ways, if at all, would your life be different if Christ had not died, if he had not risen from the dead? Apart from coming to church and a few things like that, would there be any appreciable difference to the way you live your everyday life? Can you really say that because of Christ's death and resurrection your faith and hope are now in God (verse 21), that God is the centre of your life; that you completely depend on him; that you look to him to order your life and direct it; that you know your entire future is in his hands? Can you really say that when Jesus shed his blood for you it really and truly resulted in you being rescued from 'the futility of the way of life' you were once living (verse 18), before you came to appreciate the significance of what Jesus did for you?

And yet while we cannot and must not forget the past events which determine the fundamental character of our Christian lives, we are not a people who live in the past. In verse 3 we learn God has given us a new life which is characterised by a hope which lives, a hope which vibrates and resonates with the life we have received. As explained in verse 3 we have this life and hope by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is therefore a life which cannot be extinguished even by death. Our 'hope which lives' is therefore not wishful thinking or a cross-the-fingers-and-hope-everything-will-somehow-turn-out-all-right mentality. It is a glorious certainty. We confidently declare with Thomas Watson: "We are more sure to arise out of our graves than out of our beds." We are a people filled with hope, living in constant expectancy of what God will do in the future.

For most people who live in this world the past is most important, but it is not usually an historical past. The Chinese and most Asian and African peoples, and our own Aboriginal people, place enormous stress on their ancestors. They reverence their ancestors and it is central to their whole way of life to focus their attention on them. These ancestors become figures of mythology rather than historical persons. Hindus and Buddhists also step aside from recordable history in believing that what is done in one's past lives determines what will happen in the future. So they too are primarily concerned with the past. By contrast Westerners like ourselves represent the Now-Generation. Our preoccupation is with the present. At best some of us find history interesting, perhaps even absorbing, but most Australians, even academics, have scant interest in history. Our primary concern is with squeezing as much juice as we can out of the orange. We do not think a great deal about the future. If we do it is because we view the future as an extension of the present, and our concern is to improve the quality of the imminent present as much and as fast as we can. We live in an instant society. Christians are utterly distinct from all other people on the face of the earth. Everybody else either lives in the past or the present. But we live in the future. For us hope is not something on the sidelines of the Christian life but on the field of play.

Because we live in a culture which exalts the Now, which is preoccupied with the Present, it is easy for us as Christians to get caught up in this same way of thinking. It is easy for us to think of hope as something to pay attention to every now and then. Why do we as Christians compartmentalise the various aspects of the Christian life?

Why do we put our Christian hope in a pigeon-hole and treat it as an important subject we consider on occasion? Because we live in the present, and therefore we stress what is relevant. Relevance is everything to the modern Westerner. Why, you even tune out from what I'm saying if you can't see the relevance of it. If we cannot see the immediate relevance of hope then we put it to one side and we focus our attention on that which at this point in time we consider to be relevant.

Peter is exhorting us to do something which cuts across our culture. He is urging us to do something which is unnatural, something which is alien to our Westernised piecemeal approach to life and idolisation of the Relevant. What is his exhortation? *"Focus your hope on the grace which is about to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."*

Hope is meaningless unless it is focused upon an object. The Roman philosopher Seneca defined hope as "an uncertain good". Why did he link 'hope' with 'uncertainty'? Because he had nothing definite on which to focus his hope. We do not focus our hope upon an uncertain good, but upon a very definite object. Rather like the pregnant mother. There is nothing vague about the future blessing she eagerly awaits.

What we have to get into our heads is that we are pregnant. Maybe that shouldn't be so hard now that some of us have seen Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie *Junior*. A pregnant woman has no problem thinking about the future. If she is a mentally-healthy woman then the birth of the child is the most important event in her life and this is an event which lies in the future. But it exerts a central controlling influence over everything she does and thinks, although there are, sad to say, some women who have been so thoroughly enculturated by Western secularism that they even seek to marginalise the significance of this event. However I am thinking of the normal mentally healthy woman. Her expectation causes her to be ever preparing herself mentally, physically, family-wise, in every way she prepares for the Great Day.

As soon as God gives us new life we find ourselves longing to enjoy the fullness God has in store for us. When I met Barbara, who is now my wife, and fell in love with her I longed for the day when we would be married. I looked ahead to the day when we would experience the full God-given pleasures and blessings of marriage. As Christians it was unthinkable to us to jump the gun and indulge our appetites before the right time. We were prepared to wait and it made me focus on that future event. The whole of the period of Engagement was a period of preparation. I found it hard to concentrate on much else besides preparing for the Day.

For us as Christians the Great Day is the Day when we see Jesus. Peter describes that Great Day in various ways. In verse 5 he says that at this 'last time' salvation will come to us. In verse 7 he anticipates the praise, glory and honour that we will receive when Jesus Christ is revealed, that is, when we see Jesus on the Last Day. Now why is this such a Great Day for us as Christians? Peter gives us the answer in verses 8-9. We love him, trust him and experience unspeakable joy in knowing him. Now if Peter is describing the real nature of our relationship with Christ then obviously we can't wait to see him face to face; we can't wait for the Great Day to arrive.

Thomas Brooks said, "Assurance is glory in the bud, it is the suburbs of paradise." Now

I had a wonderful relationship with Barbara during the period of our engagement. But I wasn't satisfied with just being engaged to her. I wanted to be married to her. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I wanted to experience a far greater intimacy with her than was possible during the period of our engagement. That is why at that time the then Future Wedding Day was central to my life. In the same way the Christian loves Jesus and is always thinking about him. The Christian completely trusts Jesus. The Christian experiences great joy in knowing Jesus. But he or she is not satisfied with the present relationship with Jesus. The Christian wants to experience a far greater intimacy with him than is now possible. May you and I be preoccupied with the Day which will soon come; the Day on which we will be married to Christ, the one we love, I trust, with all our hearts.

To sum up. A sequence of closely related historical events has turned our lives upside down - the horrific death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus into glory. By the pouring out of his blood Jesus has rescued us from lives of futility. Now God is the centre of our lives and we know that our future is in his hands. We do not live in some mythical past. We do not live merely for the Now. We are a unique people who live in the future, profoundly motivated by a certain hope of seeing the One we love more than any other, the Lord Jesus himself. Our lives are spent preparing ourselves for that great Day. Prepare well.