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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

[A survival guide for end-time living]



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Chapter 1

SURVIVAL

1 Peter 1:1–12

The *U.S. Government Peace Corps Manual* for volunteers details what to do if an anaconda attacks you.

Related to the boa constrictor, the anaconda is the largest snake species in the world. It grows to thirty-five feet in length and weighs 300 to 400 pounds.

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight against one another.
3. Tuck your chin in.
4. The snake will begin to nudge and climb over your body.
5. Do not panic.
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet end—always from the feet end. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic!
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time.
8. When the snake has reached your knees, slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife, and very gently slide it into the side of the snake's

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mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg, then suddenly rip upwards, severing the snake's head.

9. Be sure you have your knife.
10. Be sure your knife is sharp.¹

You may want to tear out this page and keep it handy for the next time an anaconda starts nibbling up your legs. (For the record, Snopes.com claims the “anaconda defense” is false; so if it doesn’t work for you, well, you can’t sue me.) On second thought, just hang on to the entire book. You may not need it for a snake bite, but it will come in handy when you are attacked by the devil who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). For physical and spiritual threats alike, it’s important be vigilant if you want to survive.

The apostle Peter offers timely counsel for survival. His letters offered hope to Christians who were threatened both physically and spiritually. Before we consider the apostle’s advice, however, it’s helpful to get context with a crash course in Roman history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.” Some historians believe that this saying can be traced to July 19, A.D. 64, when Rome was torched by an arsonist.

It was common knowledge in that day that Nero disliked Rome’s architectural layout. The inner-city streets were too narrow; the buildings were dilapidated. When foreign dignitaries came to visit Rome, Nero was embarrassed to give them a tour of his city.

So Nero constructed a model of an improved, symmetrical Rome. But Nero knew that his ambition would never be realized—unless, of course, by some stroke of fate the old city would be destroyed. So it has been suggested that this demented Roman emperor coaxed fate along and set his city ablaze.

Following the fire, incensed Roman citizens rallied against Nero, demanding retribution. Feeling the heat, Nero claimed, “The Christians did it. They have destroyed our beloved city in hopes of building another city for themselves.” He then commanded, “Soldiers, arrest all Christians and throw them in a dungeon.”

In their commentary on 1 Peter, Pastor Doug Murren and Barb Shurin explain, “Having his soldiers arrest the Christians en masse at their meeting places, Nero not only lent credence to his monstrous lie, but also cleverly

and diabolically got the Roman senators and citizens off his back. This marked the beginning of the Christians' hiding and meeting in the catacombs under the city—the approximate time when 1 Peter was written.”²

It was a time of severe persecution when Christians were fed to half-starved lions for sport. Christians struggled to survive. To encourage these Christians, Peter penned two letters that resound with hope.

GREETING

The first letter begins with this salutation,

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1:1, 2).

There's something warm about this introduction, isn't there? Peter writes to God's people scattered throughout Asia Minor and reminds them that they have been chosen. William Barclay comments, “Surely there can be no greater compliment and privilege in all the world than to be chosen by God.”³ Who doesn't like to be chosen?

God has chosen you and me, but for what? Peter answers, “for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance” (verse 2). God has chosen us for obedience. The apostle does not mince with words in his challenge for us to commit to radical obedience. He calls us to grow into the likeness of Christ.

A. E. Housman captured the odd irony of being chosen by God and yet failing to obey Christ's command to accept all people as God's “chosen.” Listen to his pithy poem,

How odd
Of God
To choose
The Jews.
To which it has been added:
But not so odd
As those who choose
The Jewish God

And spurn the Jews.⁴

We are chosen for obedience. Thus, we must obey *all* God's commands—including His call to love all people.

Following his introduction, Peter begins with this doxology in verse 3, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

SURVIVAL MATTERS

Next, Peter begins his message. Keep in mind who would be reading this letter. Picture the dispersed Christians who are being hunted. Imagine Sister Martha or Brother Nicodemus holed up in some hovel with other believers. In all likelihood, each person was staring down death.

When your life is threatened, you don't talk about trivial matters. You concentrate on what *really* matters. As we would expect, Peter does just that. He talks about life-and-death stuff.

Peter's letter reads like the spiritual equivalent to the book series *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht have struck gold with this series. With more than four million copies sold worldwide, the survival series has a cultlike following.

Each book is a manual, written in a factual tone, based on interviews with experts in a variety of fields. The chapters offer instructions on how to survive any imaginable situation. For example, if your parachute fails to open, you're supposed to "signal to a jumping companion"—but the book doesn't say what to do if you're jumping alone! In case you're attacked by an alligator, you need to go for the gator's eyes and nose. OK? Now you know.

The authors say in the preface, "The principle behind this book is a simple one: You just never know. You never really know what life will throw at you, what is sitting around the corner. You never really know when you might be called upon to choose life or death with your actions. But when you are called, you need to know what to do. That's why this book is written."⁵

Peter could have used the same preface in his book, for this letter is a survival guide to Christians. Maybe you need a survival guide right now. You're trying to survive an illness, you have an unrelenting work schedule, or you're struggling to survive an abusive relationship.

If you're fighting to survive, take heart. Peter offers a handbook with some helpful counsel to saints striving to be survivors. You might think of this opening passage as three chapters in *Peter's Survival Handbook*.

1. YOU WILL OUTLIVE ANY PROBLEM YOU FACE.

The first chapter reminds us of this truth: *You will outlive any problem you face*. Beginning in verse 3, Peter writes,

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (verses 3–6).

Peter provides a wonderful perspective to Christians who are struggling to survive. He reminds us of our living hope in the resurrected Christ. “Your salvation is coming,” Peter reminds us. “Rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (verse 6).

Whatever problem you’re facing, if you accept Christ as your resurrected Savior, you will outlive your problem. It is in this hope that we see beyond the anguish of our world.

It’s an old story, but worth repeating. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a missionary couple was returning home on a ship after serving for twenty-five years in Africa. On board was a famous passenger, Theodore Roosevelt, who was returning from an African safari. Since Roosevelt was a candidate for president, there were bands and crowds and much cheering as he stepped off the ship. The missionary remarked, “Isn’t it amazing that he returns home after hunting a few weeks to bands and cheering crowds and all that adulation. But we return home from twenty-five years of serving God, and there’s no one here even to greet us.”

His wife tugged at his arm, smiled, and said, “But, dear, we’re not home yet.”⁶

That’s worth remembering the next time you’re wondering whether or not you can survive. Whatever problem you face, anchor your life in the living hope, our resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. You will outlive every heartache, every challenge, every tear.

In his book *Our Greatest Gift*, Henri Nouwen imagines twins—a brother and a sister—talking to each other in their mother’s womb,

The sister said to the brother, “I believe there is life after birth.”

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The brother protested, “No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us.”

The girl insisted, “There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.” Then she added, “And I think there is a mother.”

“A mother!” the boy scoffed. “I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. This is not such a bad place, after all.”

“But don’t you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They’re quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.”

“Yes,” he answered.

“Well,” the sister said, “I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face.”⁷

Don’t think for a moment that this dark world is all there is! The day is coming when you will see your Maker face-to-face. Any “squeeze” you’re feeling now is temporary; you *will* outlive it.

2. YOUR FAITH IS REFINED IN HARDSHIP.

Next, Peter continues his encouragement to persecuted Christians by saying, “*Your faith is refined in hardship.*” He writes, “[Your trials] 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 honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (verse 7).

The Bible teaches that our faith is refined by the fires we endure. This verse has become especially meaningful to me during the past year. On September 8, 2008, our church school, Spring Valley Academy, caught fire in the electrical room—causing millions of dollars of damage. Thankfully no one was injured. But for the remaining 2008–2009 school year, we held classes in a vacant building some eight miles from our campus. It was more than a little inconvenient.

The damage was extensive. The fire even forced us to delay the 2009 school year by a week. But what a day of rejoicing it was when we were back in our building. The local paper reported,

The gym is still closed, and some of the new office furniture hasn’t arrived, but Spring Valley Academy will again host students, who

spent nearly a year in another school building after a[n] electrical fire. . . .

Those affiliated with the school who completed the 2008-09 school year at the former Ridgeville Christian School say they are relieved to re-enter the 41-year-old building that has housed the tight-knit school and its community.

“We can’t believe it,” said Vicki Swetnam, the school’s recruiting and marketing manager. “We’re all pinching ourselves. . . .

“In spite of the fire, there has been a blessing,” Swetnam said. “We’ve returned to an improved facility.”⁸

Nearly the entire building was gutted, and the result is that now we have a brand-new school building! While we would have never wished for this trial, board members, parents, staff, and students alike agree that much good has come out of the flames. Our faith has been strengthened. Our characters have been refined. Our God has proven faithful.

Peter reminds us that fires can refine us as a people of faith. In the words of actress Brittany Murphy, “Everybody has difficult years, but a lot of times the difficult years end up being the greatest years of your whole entire life, if you survive them.”⁹

Our faith is refined by fire. It was true for Spring Valley Academy. It was true for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It was true for Gilbert Tuha-bonye (*Too-ha-bon-yay*).

Gilbert’s journey began in the war-torn country of Burundi. Today he lives in Austin, Texas. His is an inspiring story of survival.

In 1993, Gilbert lay buried under a mound of smoldering bodies. He was a teenager, caught in the crossfire of the centuries-old battle between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. Fueled by deep hate, the Hutu students at Kibimba high school, joined by their parents and other Hutu tribesmen, forced more than one hundred Tutsi children and teachers into a small room and tormented them with machetes. Both the survivors and the dead were torched with fire. The Hutus then partied and taunted their victims for the next nine hours.

Gilbert shielded himself from the fire with the bodies of his classmates. After hours of inconceivable pain, twice having tried to take his own life, Gilbert heard a voice within say, “You don’t want to die.” With his back and legs on fire, he used a charred bone to break through one of the windows. On scorched feet, Gilbert jumped free of the fire and ran into the cover of

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the night—the lone survivor of one of the most horrific massacres in the long, bloody history of the Hutu-Tutsi war.

Today, Gilbert is on a mission: to show others what one man—set on fire and left for dead—can accomplish. His very name hints at his divine calling in life. *Tuhabonye* means “a son of God.”

“In Burundi,” Gilbert explains, “your last name has to have meaning. When I was born, it was a difficult time. It was right after the war. There had been a big drought, crickets attacked the crops—and then my mother broke her ankle. When I was born, she said, ‘This is not my son. This is a son of God.’ ”

When Gilbert’s mom visited him in the hospital (where he remained for three months after his narrow escape from the genocide), she said to him, “If it wasn’t for God, you are dead.”

Gilbert has struggled with that notion. He wonders, *What about the others? They, too, were valued children of God. Why weren’t they spared?* Gilbert explains, “That’s the thing I didn’t understand. Afterward, I asked myself, ‘Why me? Why did I survive?’ ”

Gilbert answers by saying, “Eventually, I realized I had to help people, coaching them, telling them my story, telling what happened. When I help people, I feel good.”

Gilbert’s story in *Reader’s Digest* concludes with this summary, “He’s a flesh-and-blood symbol, a real-life survivor, a true son of God, a man on a mission.”¹⁰

His remarkable story of survival serves as an inspiration to millions. After all, everybody faces harsh challenges, right? Who is immune to disappointment and pain? The real question is this: How can we survive the inevitable flames in life?

3. GOD IS AT WORK EVEN WHEN YOU CAN’T SEE HIM.

Peter answers by saying, “*You will outlive any problem you face. Your faith is refined in hardship. And finally, God is at work even when you can’t see Him.*”

Listen to Peter, “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, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (verses 8, 9).

Even though you cannot see God in the darkness of this world, He is at work. In his book, *The Dance of Hope*, Bill Frye tells the story of a blind stu-

dent at the University of Colorado. The student lost his sight as a teenager during an explosion in his garage. But the accident not only stole his sight, it raped him of his hope. He became an angry and embittered young man.

The boy recounts, “I retreated to my bedroom and wouldn’t even come out for meals. For months, I wouldn’t speak to anybody. I resolved to live the rest of my life in misery.”

Finally the young man’s father had had enough. “Son,” he said, “enough of this pity party. Get on with your life. Winter’s coming and I need you to install the storm windows.”

The boy protested, “But how can I install storm windows? I’m blind!”

The father replied, “Find a way. Do it before I get home from work tonight.” The boy heard the door slam as his father left. He scowled, “OK, I’ll show him! He’ll be sorry when I fall off the ladder and break my neck.”

Groping through the garage, he found the windows and the ladder. Cautiously, he went to work. To his surprise, he successfully installed all of them. By day’s end, the father’s desire was fulfilled. The boy performed his first constructive work since the accident. That simple act boosted his courage to take on another project, and then another, until he got his life back.

Then the young man shared the rest of his story, “It was a year later that I learned that as I was installing those windows my father was never more than four feet from me the entire day.”

You see, the father was not about to abandon his boy. Your heavenly Father feels the same way about you. Peter tells us, “God is keeping careful watch over us” (1 Peter 1:5, *The Message*).

A FINAL SURVIVAL STORY

Friend, I don’t know your survival story, but I know this: If you claim Jesus as your Savior, you will outlive any problem you face. Your faith will be refined through hardship. And God will always be with you—even when you can’t see Him.

The survival story of Stephanie Fast illustrates all three of these principles. In her native South Korea, Stephanie was called a *toogie*, or a “foreign devil”—a child born of a Korean mother and an American father during the Korean War.

Abandoned at the age of four, she lived with gangs on the streets of Daejon, where she was abused emotionally, physically, and sexually. By the age of six, she had learned not to cry. Stephanie says, “You don’t let people know you hurt because the more you let them know you hurt, the more

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pleasure it gives them. By the time I was six, I was dead emotionally.”

Stephanie was persecuted, tortured, and finally discarded to die in a garbage dump. But she was miraculously rescued by a nurse employed by World Vision.

A few years later, a childless missionary couple, the Merwins, visited that World Vision orphanage and met Stephanie. She was covered with boils and dirt, lice-infected, worm-ridden, and cross-eyed from malnutrition. She was so dead emotionally that she rejected any gestures of compassion. But the Merwins sensed God speaking to their hearts, “She is the one for you.”

So they adopted Stephanie.

Despite the healing love the Merwins poured into her, Stephanie’s past tormented her throughout her teens. But as an adult she experienced a deeply personal encounter with Jesus. She realized that she could exchange her pain with Jesus at the cross. Finally she found her identity and purpose in the light of God’s love.

Now Stephanie shares her riveting story of survival with audiences around the world. At the heart of her talk is this message, “There is no event in my life that I would be better without.”¹¹

Stephanie offers a compelling snapshot of a survivor who understands that she will outlive any heartache of this earth. She rejoices in how God has shaped her through adversity. And now she testifies that God has been with her through the horrible ordeal, and He remains a faithful Friend.

May Stephanie’s story and Peter’s letter encourage us to live with that same perspective, spirit of resilience, and living hope. Take courage, for by God’s grace you will survive!

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