

## “This Word Is the Good News”

### The Third in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

*Texts: 1 Peter 1:13-25; Isaiah 40:1-11*

---

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then you are also a citizen of the heavenly kingdom. Our heavenly citizenship also means that we are, in a sense, resident aliens in the land in which we live (in our case, the United States of America). In light of our dual citizenship, the question raised by our text is what, if anything, distinguishes us from the non-Christians around us? The answer to this question is to be found in the simple fact that Christianity is not a culture, but a system of doctrine. Generally speaking, Christians do not identify themselves by wearing a unique Christian costume (clothing, hairstyle, etc.). Or by eating or not eating certain foods. Or by withdrawing from daily life and keeping to ourselves in Christian communities isolated from the non-Christians around us. There are notable exceptions to be sure—but these are exceptions nonetheless. The Amish wear distinctive clothing and avoid modern “worldly” contrivances, the Seventh Day Adventists follow certain dietary laws, and there are orders in the Roman church which cloister themselves so as to be fully devoted to a life of contemplation, or to support vows of celibacy, poverty, or silence. But Peter mentions none of these things when writing his first letter to Christian exiles in Asia Minor. The Apostle exhorts Christian aliens to identify ourselves as citizens of heaven by our doctrine (what we profess about the Triune God) and by our conduct, (we strive to be holy as the Lord is holy). This is how we as Christians distinguish ourselves from the non-Christians around us—our doctrine and life.

As we continue our series on 1 Peter, we move further into the opening chapter where Peter describes how Christian aliens are to conduct themselves during their earthly sojourn. Peter is writing to a group of struggling Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor (Turkey). His readers/hearers had been displaced from their homes several years earlier as a result of a decree by the Roman emperor Claudius, who granted confiscated land to retired Roman soldiers in the regions mentioned by Peter. There is a sense in which all Christians are similarly “elect exiles”—the term Peter uses when referring to Christians hearing and reading this letter. What Peter says to those elect exiles uprooted by the Diaspora in the first century, also applies to us. How do we conduct ourselves as resident aliens in the modern world in light of Peter’s exhortation to those in first century Asia Minor to live holy lives ?

In the opening section of 1 Peter, the Apostle points to the final outcome of God’s grace in Jesus Christ (the salvation of our souls) as the means of encouraging struggling exiles during difficult times. Christians pilgrims should keep the big picture in mind (God will save us from our sins) during the time we must endure our earthly struggles. If the previous section of Peter’s letter focused upon our eternal hope and heavenly inheritance (vv. 3-12), then in our text (vv. 13-25) Peter deals with how Christians are to conduct themselves in this life, before they realize their heavenly inheritance in the next. Having the living hope which Peter described in verse 3—that God will preserve us through the same power manifest when he raised Jesus from the dead—how then ought we live in the here and now?

As we turn to our text, we should take note of the obvious change in subjects between verse 12 and verse 13, evident in Peter’s use of the conjunction “therefore” (*dio*). What follows (in vv. 13 ff) is an exhortation from the Apostle to take action based upon the previous unpacking of the gospel as the basis for the living hope which God’s people possess through faith in Jesus Christ. There are three imperatives (commands) given us by Peter. First, we are to fix our hope upon Jesus (v. 13). Second, we are to live

holy lives which reflect the holiness of our creator and redeemer (vv. 14-16). Third, we are to live in the fear of the Lord, because the one we invoke as our Father is also judge of all the earth (v. 17-19).<sup>1</sup>

The way we should understand these imperatives is as follows: Because God has caused his people to be born again, and then called us to a living hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and because we are guaranteed an incorruptible inheritance which cannot perish, in addition to our final salvation which is to be revealed in the last times, *therefore* we should act as instructed in the following verses.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the imperatives Peter is about to set forth describe how “elect exiles” identify themselves as believers in Jesus Christ (and therefore citizens of heaven) while they live as resident aliens in the civil kingdom. What makes Christians different from the non-Christians around them?

Peter’s instructions to the elect exiles presupposes that they presently possess a living hope, that Jesus is even now guarding their faith, and that already they have been sanctified and set apart by the Holy Spirit for obedience and for sprinkling by the blood of Jesus. What follows, then, are not instructions about how to become a Christian, but instead are exhortations to Christians living under very difficult conditions about how they identify themselves as citizens of heaven, and how they are to live in light of that heavenly citizenship they presently possess. It is to Christians that Peter exhorts his readers, *“preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

The implication of Peter’s exhortation is that Christians must not be foolish, or naive and mistakenly assume that the world around us is benign toward the Christian faith and those who possess a heavenly citizenship through faith in Jesus Christ. This dangerous assumption—that the world is indifferent to Christianity—is easily made by people who mistakenly believe that America is a Christian nation with “biblical values.” America is not a “Christian nation,” although we can say America is a religious nation. Whatever Christian values our nation had in the past (or in the present) are nothing but the faint smell of perfume in an empty perfume bottle. Peter’s exhortation is intended to jar his hearers into action. *“Prepare your minds for action.”* The Greek text conjures up the image of someone tucking in their outer garment so as to run or do serious work.<sup>3</sup>

These elect exiles of the Diaspora must strive to understand the hope that they have through faith in Jesus Christ. They must also understand the innate hostility in the culture around them to their Christian faith. The seriousness of this was much easier for Peter’s audience to understand than it is for us. We’ve not been displaced from our homes, or tortured, beaten, or prevented from buying and selling because we refuse to identify Caesar as Lord or worship pagan deities. In our context, where hostility toward Christianity often comes with a smile, it is harder for us to prepare our minds for action, because often we do not see any direct threat. In our situation, preparing our minds for action means that we need to know our Bibles and our catechism. We must understand the person and work of the Savior who is the central figure in the Bible, as well as the way in which non-Christians attempt to attack the Christian

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos, 1:13.

<sup>2</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos, 1:13.

faith (in an intellectual sense) or when they bully and belittle those who follow Christ and reject the pagan mores and practices of modern America. Peter is telling us get to work and make a concerted effort to understand the Christian faith, as well as the challenges from the unbelief all around us.

Peter also exhorts Christians to be sober-minded—i.e., “clear headed.” This means that we are to take these matters seriously, and not act as though we are in a drunken stupor. The peril to our souls as resident aliens in a hostile world is not an issue we can ignore or avoid. There is an ever-widening gap between believers in Jesus and American secularists. We live in a world of unbelievers who do not like, nor do not understand the Christian faith, who are not concerned with matters of sin and grace, and who think Christians are self-righteous and judgmental nitwits. This is why, Peter exhorts us to self-consciously prepare for action, and stay sober-minded by setting our hope (our affections) on the grace which will be brought to us when Jesus appears. After all, where our treasure is, our heart will be.

The culmination of this living hope is when Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and makes all things new—not before. There will be no earthly utopia as many seek. While we can understand why John Lennon’s *Imagine* has become an anthem of sorts for many of our contemporaries, Christians have a different kind of hope altogether. Peter gives no hint of an earthly millennial kingdom yet to dawn before Christ returns (as taught in postmillennialism), nor is there any exhortation whatsoever from the Apostle for elect exiles to seek to transform the pagan culture of the Greco-Roman world into some sort of Christian society. But Peter does say that the Christian eschatological hope—the Lord’s return at the end of the age—must inform how we are to live our lives until the Lord returns.

Because we have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit and set apart for God’s purposes, in verse 14 Peter can speak of Christians as “*as obedient children,*” (of their heavenly Father) who are “*not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.*” The first thing which characterizes elect exiles is that the power of sin over us has been broken. People who were once slaves to sin, have now (by God’s grace) become obedient children who are no longer enslaved to their sinful passions. God has revealed the truth about himself to us through the gospel of his Son, in and through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The light of gospel exposes the darkness of sin, and the futility of a life lived apart from faith in Jesus Christ—as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:12-13, “*remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*” The only thing a non-Christian can do is “seize the day.” There is nothing else to which they can hang on. A Christian, on the other hand, sees that all of life is to be lived in the presence of God (*Corem Deo*) for his glory, and for our benefit.

Peter minces no words. He calls all elect exiles to a life of holiness. Our conduct is what marks us off from the non-Christians around us, and is to be a reflection of our heavenly citizenship yet to be fully realized. To be “holy” means to be set apart by God, for God, specifically for his purposes. The gospel then is the basis for a life of gratitude through which we seek to reflect God’s holiness (as revealed in his commandments) in all that we do. Quoting from Leviticus 11:44 (among others), in verses 15-16, Peter commands us “*but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’*”

There are two very common ways to misread Peter’s command. The first misreading is to understand this command as though we can actually become as holy as God is through our own good works, and by ceasing from all known sin. John Wesley tried this with his doctrine of Christian perfection, and in the

process, crushed many a bruised reed and snuffed out many a smoulder wick. The second misreading is to so qualify Peter's command that nothing remains of the requirement to be holy, and the necessity of imitating that holiness which God reveals to us throughout the Old Testament (especially in the law), and with even greater clarity in the person of his Son. If we wish to understand what a life of holiness entails, we look to the life of Jesus.

It is vital for us to be crystal clear about the meaning of "holiness" in order to understand Peter's command that we be holy. As just mentioned, the primary meaning of the term "holy" is to be set-apart by God for his use and purposes. The secondary meaning of "holy" is ethical purity in the sense of conformity to God's will (i.e., obedience to his commandments). Peter has already told us earlier in the chapter that God already has set Christians apart through the work of the Holy Spirit, "sanctifying us" to be sprinkled with the blood of Christ, and for obedience to God (i.e., obeying his commands), which is but another way of saying we have been set apart for "a life of holiness."

Furthermore, the command to be holy as God is holy is used in different ways throughout the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus proclaims similar words to the crowd which had assembled out in the wilderness to hear him teach about the kingdom of God. To a Jewish audience who were confident in their own personal righteousness and holiness before God, Jesus makes explicit what obedience to the law actually means. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48), Jesus demands "*you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Jesus' point is that if holiness is mere outward conformity to the commandments of God (as the Pharisees were teaching), then we must display perfect obedience to all of God's commands. But Jesus also makes plain that such holiness extends beyond outward conformity to the heart—our thoughts and motives. If we expect to enter heaven through our own holiness, then we must be obedient to God's commands as was Jesus. In this sense, the commandment to be holy condemns all sinners to eternal punishment. The commandment to be holy absolutely crushes all human attempts to earn, or claim a justifying righteousness before God.

Peter, however, is speaking to people (both believing Jews and Gentiles) who already have been sprinkled with Christ's blood, who already possess a living hope, are guarded in the faith, and who are guaranteed their heavenly inheritance because God is keeping it for them. Those who were once at home in the Greco-Roman world, now find themselves outcasts, yet remain the beloved of God. Those who were ignorant of God, now know him through Jesus Christ. Through the work of Jesus Christ, those who were not God's people, now are his people. Those once controlled by their sinful passions, now are set apart for obedience. Those who once lived in futility and ignorance, now live holy lives in conformity to God's commands. Once believed, the gospel transforms believers so that they begin to live "holy lives."<sup>4</sup>

Peter is not saying, nor even implying, that only those who can live a holy life as demanded by God's law will gain the promised inheritance. What he is saying is that all those who presently possess the hope of a heavenly inheritance (people who are spoken of throughout the New Testament as "saints" or "holy"), will strive with everything in them to be holy as God is holy. Will they fail? Of course. Will they continue to strive for holiness? Yes. In fact, it is our holy conduct—not our clothing, diet, or withdrawing from society—which identifies us as citizens of heaven while we live our lives as elect exiles upon the earth. We are God's people, so we strive to set ourselves apart from the evil in our heart, as well as set ourselves apart from the evil in the world around us. As citizens of heaven, we profess Jesus Christ as

---

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic; 2007), 1018.

our ultimate king, not Caesar. But make no mistake about it, for this, the world will hate us (so will Caesar), even as they hated Jesus. It is our holiness—our set-apartness unto God, and our striving to obey his commandments—which distinguishes us from the non-Christians around us.

In verses 17-21, Peter issues a call for a reverent fear of the Lord. This call requires a fair bit of explanation. For one thing, fear of God does not mean terror—we are not to take Peter to mean that those who are in Christ should live in fear that if their lives are not holy enough, Christ will cast them out. Then there is the question, “how can Christians truly possess joy if they are called to live in constant fear of God’s judgment?” The reverent fear of which Peter is speaking is similar to that of someone who has a dangerous job—great care and diligence are part of the job, but if one gets careless they can be seriously injured. Christians should not live in fear of God’s judgment, but they must still “fear” God.

There are two things to consider in this regard. First, in context, Peter is writing to elect exiles who are suffering greatly at the hands of the Romans and pagans throughout Asia Minor because of the Diaspora. Their circumstances are perilous. These elect exiles must trust in God’s power daily to keep them safe and preserve them in times of trial. They must not be too confident in themselves, or get cocky knowing that God is infinitely more powerful than Caesar. In light of the command to live holy lives, Christians must be on guard constantly, so as not to slip back to their former ways of living to avoid persecution, or to indulge the flesh. Christians must fear God—who is the final judge—not mockery from the world.

The second thing to consider is that Peter is writing in light of the stress upon Wisdom found throughout the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 4:10, as an example, as the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, Moses exhorts them to remember “*how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’*” In Proverbs 9:10, we read that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*” Just as the Israelites were to fear YHWH, so too elect exiles must not become complacent during their exile. If we wish to be wise, we must allow the “fear of the Lord,” to inform all of life.<sup>5</sup>

In verses 17-19, Peter makes this point quite directly. “*And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*” Our fear of the Lord should drive us back, again, and again, to consider the cost of our redemption. If we truly fear God in the proper sense, we will be grateful to him for all the he has done for us in Jesus Christ. Silver and gold—as valuable as they are in this world—are worthless in the next.<sup>6</sup>

The proper fear of God arises when Christians reflect upon the fact that we have been ransomed by the blood of Jesus, the sinless and true Passover lamb of God. The word to be “ransomed” (*lutron*) was used in secular Greek to refer to the ransom paid to free prisoners or slaves. The payment (ransom) which sets us free from sin and death is the shed blood of none other than Jesus, the Son of God, whose death puts an end to the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament (the futility of your forefathers). Jesus alone

---

<sup>5</sup> Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos, 1:17.

<sup>6</sup> Cranfield, I & II Peter and Jude, 54.

is without sin. Jesus was that one promised to God's people throughout the Old Testament, and his blood (not the corpuscles—but the giving of his life) shows us the tremendous price he paid to save us from our sins. It is the consideration of these things we find the gospel which produces the proper fear of God, as well as providing the motivation (gratitude) to live holy lives before the secularists around us.

In verses 20-21, Peter makes the point that the death of Jesus was not some sort of accident, forcing God to change his plans. Peter says, [Jesus] “*was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*” The coming of Jesus in the flesh was God's plan from all eternity, and God's plan was accomplished when Jesus suffered and died to save us from our sins—to shed his blood to release us from the guilt and power of sin. God has given proof of this through the resurrection of Jesus, so that we, as elect exiles, believe in Jesus and place our hope in God's plan for his people. The wonder of all of this is alone the proper motivation to fear God, live holy lives, and give Jesus the honor and glory, which he alone deserves.

Keeping the saving work of Jesus before our eyes (through the preaching of the gospel) is the means through which we live holy lives, thereby identifying ourselves as citizens of heaven while we dwell in the city of man. Peter puts it this way in verses 22-23. “*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.*” The Christian life (living in holiness) is characterized first of all by purification. When seen against the Old Testament background of ceremonial washings, Peter is likely referring to baptism and repentance. But the tense of the verb (perfect) indicates that believers already have undergone this purification—we *have been purified, already*—through obedience to the truth, that is, through believing the gospel—the living and abiding word.<sup>7</sup> Baptism is the sign and seal of that purification.

Peter also says that believers are characterized by their sincere love for one another (a brotherly love, *philadelphia*), which he describes as the fruit of the new birth. When people who are dead in sin come to new life in Jesus Christ (because God has caused them to be born again), one thing they will do is to love others also saved from sin by the precious blood of Jesus. And, it is well worth noting, that when we are born again, that new life (Peter's metaphor of the imperishable seed) cannot perish. Once truly born again, Christians cannot become “unborn again” any more than Jesus can go back and die on the cross after his death and resurrection. To put it simply, a Christian cannot lose their salvation because our salvation is grounded in the finished work of Christ, not in anything we do or accomplish.

To ram his point home, in verses 24-25, Peter sets out a sharp contrast between the things of this world—which are temporal and destined to perish—with eternal things which cannot perish. Quoting from Isaiah 40 (our Old Testament lesson), Peter reminds us that “*all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*” It is the word of God, specifically the good news (the gospel) which gives us new life and promises an eternal inheritance. We are but flesh, and destined to die. As God's word of promise is eternal, so too is the salvation we possess in Jesus Christ. We will die, but we will also live forever, because God's eternal word says so.

---

<sup>7</sup> Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 5-7.

The application we must draw from this section of 1 Peter is simply that we must be about the business of being ready for action while we are exiles in a foreign land by anchoring our hope in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in his gospel promises. We must not be naive about the danger unbelief around us poses to our souls, nor can we be indifferent to the sinful desires within us to act like the pagans around us. In keeping the saving work of Jesus Christ ever before us, we will fear God, live in holiness, and love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The holiness, biblically defined, which distinguishes us from the secularists around us includes both the doctrine we profess and our striving to live holy lives as God is holy—not our clothing, our food, or our withdrawal from society, nor even our attempts to transform pagan culture. And we will do these things out of joy and gratitude, Peter says, because the eternal word is preached to us. This word, The Apostle tells us, is the good news of the gospel.