

Strangers Here, Yet a Royal Priesthood

A Study on 1 Peter 2:1-11

Study Bible Studies Second study in the First Epistle of Peter series

1 Peter 2:1-11

Psalms 118:22

Isaiah 28:16

A Bible study given at Christ Church, Noida

Introduction

First Peter has both a doctrinal and a practical approach. However, unlike Paul, who divided his letters into a beginning section on doctrine and a concluding section on application, Peter merges the two. His book is much more difficult to outline; in many ways, it reflects a sermon more than a letter.

In our previous session we considered, in good detail, the background of this letter — its authorship, estimated time and place of writing, target audience, and theme. Although First Peter is a short letter, it touches on various doctrines and has much to say about Christian life and duties. It is not surprising that different commentators have found in it different principal themes: it has been characterised as a letter on suffering and persecution, on suffering and glory, on hope, on pilgrimage, on courage, and as a letter dealing with the true grace of God. Peter states, in chapter five, verse twelve, "I have written briefly unto you, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand" (1 Peter 5:12, KJV). This is a fitting general description of the letter, though it does not exclude the presence of numerous subordinate and contributory themes. The letter includes a series of exhortations that run from 1:13 to 5:11.

We concluded previously that the letter is all about a living hope and inheritance, and we summarised Chapter One under six main points: that faith has to be tested through the crucible of trials, temptations, and persecutions; that we need to be purified by obeying the truth; that we are to love one another deeply from the heart; that believers are born again, not of perishable seed, their new birth being not through human endeavour but by the work of God; that human beings are mortal, and are like the flowers of the field; and that God's word, and particularly His living Word, Jesus, endures for ever.

Introduction to Chapter Two

Believers are constantly exposed to a world system energised by Satan and his demons, whose effort is to discredit the Church and to destroy its credibility and integrity. One of the ways Satan works is by finding Christians whose lives are not consistent with the Word of God, and then parading them before unbelievers to show what a sham the Church is. Christians must stand against this enemy and silence its critics by the power of holy lives. In this chapter, Peter continues his general exhortation to holiness, enforcing it by several reasons taken from the very foundation on which Christianity is built, namely Jesus Christ. The means of understanding and internalising the Word of God is expounded, and all

contrary qualities are condemned (verses 1 to 12). Peter also answers some very practical questions about Christian living: do Christians need a priesthood to intercede with God for them (2:5-9)? What should be the Christian's attitude to secular government and civil obedience (2:13-17)? What should be a Christian employee's attitude towards a hostile employer (2:18)? This first Epistle of Peter is all about patiently enduring escalating persecution, and teaching believers how to live victoriously amid all hostility: without losing hope, without becoming bitter, trusting in Christ the Lord, and looking forward to His second coming.

Rid of Sin (Verse 1)

"Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings" (1 Peter 2:1, KJV).

Ridding oneself of every sinful inclination is a prerequisite for spiritual growth and maturity in the believer. This is not a theme unique to this Epistle; it has been forcefully emphasised by Paul and others. "Malice," the Greek word for evil, is used eleven times in the New Testament to indicate the wickedness that comes from within a person, and it is against this that believers are cautioned by both Peter and Paul. Paul, indeed, is more explicit still in his own exhortation against sin. In Colossians, chapter three, verses five to ten, he writes:

"Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Colossians 3:5-10, KJV).

A believer has died and risen with Christ, and is called to lay aside what is evil, as one would lay aside an old, soiled garment, never to put it on again. The Christian's new life cannot grow unless the old sinful nature is fully renounced; when that purging takes place, the Word does its own work.

Desire the Pure Milk of the Word (Verses 2 and 3)

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious" (1 Peter 2:2-3, KJV).

One characteristic all children share is a desire to grow up, to be like an elder brother or sister, or like their parents. When we are born again in Christ, we become spiritual newborn babies, and if we are healthy, we will yearn to grow. How sad it is that some never do. The need for milk is a natural instinct in a baby, signalling the desire for nourishment that leads to growth, and the same principle applies to every born-again believer. Once we recognise our need for the spiritual milk that is God's Word, and begin to find our nourishment in Christ, our spiritual appetite will increase, and we will begin to mature.

The question before each one of us is this: how strong is our desire for God's Word?

The Living Stone and a Chosen People (Verses 4 to 8)

In describing the Church as God's spiritual house, Peter drew on several Old Testament texts familiar to his Jewish Christian readers. He quoted Psalm 118:22, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner" (Psalm 118:22, KJV); Isaiah 8:14, "And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel" (Isaiah 8:14, KJV); and again Isaiah 28:16, "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste" (Isaiah 28:16, KJV). Peter's readers would have understood the living stone to refer to Israel; Peter then applied the image of the stone to Christ, and in doing so showed that the Church does not cancel the Jewish heritage, but fulfils it.

It is interesting to note that, while Peter portrayed the Church as a living, spiritual house, with Christ as its foundation and cornerstone and each believer as a stone within it, Paul portrayed the Church as a body, with Christ as its head and each believer as one of its members. There is no conflict here, as both images emphasise community: one stone is not a temple, nor even a wall, just as one part of a body is useless without the others. In our individualistic age, it is easy to forget our interdependence with other Christians; when God calls us to a task, He is also calling others to work alongside us, so that our individual efforts might be multiplied, and we might together build a beautiful house for God.

In verse five, Peter speaks of the believer's priesthood and spiritual sacrifices. In Old Testament times, sacrifices were invariably the offerings of animals, birds, and grain, yet even then God made it clear that obedience from the heart mattered far more to Him. This is evident in Samuel's words to Saul: "Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22, KJV). In Psalm 40:6 we read, "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required" (Psalm 40:6, KJV), and in Amos we are told, "I hate, I despise your feast days... Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them... But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:21-22, 24, KJV).

God wants us, His holy priesthood, to offer ourselves as living, spiritual sacrifices, daily laying aside our own desires and following Jesus, placing all our energies and resources at His disposal, and trusting Him to guide us.

Peter often thought of what Jesus had spoken to him after his own confession that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God": "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18, KJV). Peter goes on to assert that Christ Himself is the stone that truly matters in the building of the Church. Psalm 118:22 tells us that the stone the builders rejected has become the head of the corner, the most important part of God's house, and this very verse was quoted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). Just as the cornerstone is so essential to the building, our Lord Jesus Christ is, likewise, completely trustworthy, precious to believers, and, though rejected by some, the most important part of the Church.

Jesus Christ is also called "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence" (1 Peter 2:8, KJV). Some stumble over Christ because they reject Him, or refuse to believe that He is the way of salvation; those who have refused to believe in Christ have made the greatest mistake of their lives, stumbling over the very One who could save them and give meaning to their existence.

The Chosen People, the Royal Priesthood (Verses 9 and 10)

Peter speaks here of "the priesthood of all believers." In Old Testament times, people did not approach God directly; a priest acted as intermediary between God and sinful human beings. With Christ's victory on the Cross, that pattern changed. Now we may come directly into God's presence without fear (Hebrews 4:16), and we are given the responsibility of bringing others to Him as well; when we are united with Christ as members of His body, we join in His priestly work of reconciling God and man.

We often base our sense of worth upon our own accomplishments, yet we must understand that our relationship with Christ is far more important than our work, our successes, our wealth, or our knowledge. God has chosen us as His very own, and has called us to represent Him to others; our value comes from being one with Jesus, not from what we can achieve.

Aliens and Strangers (Verse 11)

Peter asserts, in verse eleven, that as believers in Christ we are "strangers and pilgrims" (1 Peter 2:11, KJV) in this world, for our true home is with God. Heaven is not the pink-cloud-and-harp existence popular in paintings and cartoons; Heaven is where God lives, and life there operates according to His own eternal and unshakeable principles and values. Heaven came to earth in the symbolism of the Jewish sanctuary in Old Testament times, but it comes to us in a fuller way still in the Person of Jesus Christ, "God with us," and it has permeated the whole world since the Holy Spirit came to live permanently within every believer.

One day, after Jesus has judged and destroyed all sin, the kingdom of Heaven will rule every corner of the earth. John saw this day in a vision, and cried out, "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelation 21:3, KJV). Our true loyalty, therefore, should be to our citizenship in Heaven, to God's truth, and to His way of life; and because we are loyal to Jesus, we will often feel like strangers in a world that would prefer to ignore Him.

Live Such Good Lives (Verse 12)

Peter's counsel here aligns closely with our Lord's own words: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, KJV). If our conduct is above reproach, even hostile people may come, in the end, to praise God for it. Peter's readers were scattered among unbelieving Gentiles inclined to believe and spread malicious lies about Christians; attractive, gracious, and upright conduct in Christ could prove such rumours false, and might even win unbelieving critics to the Lord's side. It would be wrong for us to write people off because they misunderstand Christianity; rather, we should show them Christ by the manner of our lives, so that the day may come when those who once criticised will praise Jesus Christ alongside us.

Submission to Civil Authorities (Verses 13 to 17)

When Peter told his readers to submit to civil authorities, he was speaking of the Roman Empire under Nero, a notoriously cruel tyrant; he was plainly not telling them to compromise their faith or their conscience, but in most aspects of daily life, it was possible and desirable for Christians to live according to the laws of their land. Today, while some Christians live in freedom, others live under repressive governments; the persecution seen in Odisha, and in certain other States of India, in recent years, is typical of such treatment at the hands of governments in power. Peter urges every believer to cooperate with the authorities as far as conscience allows, for the sake of our Lord, so that both His good news and His people may receive due respect. If we are to be persecuted, it should be for obeying God, not for breaking moral or civil law. Are there times, then, when we should not submit to the authorities? For one thing, we should never allow any government to force us to disobey God; Jesus and His disciples never disobeyed the civil authorities for merely personal reasons, and when they did resist, it was always in order to follow a higher loyalty to God. We ought to live at peace with the state for as long as the state allows us to live by our own religious convictions; in the present day this subject assumes highly complex dimensions, and would require separate treatment and discussion in an appropriate forum.

Christians have freedom in Christ in more ways than one, but the apostles defined that freedom more narrowly than its common, everyday use might suggest. Christians use their freedom as a tool for a life of exuberant service, permitting themselves to reach their highest potential; Christ has given us freedom from religious rules and from eternal guilt, and we should use that freedom to reach for the very best God has for us. Let our freedom sing of power, joy, and love, accountable always to our Lord Jesus Christ, and devoted, at the same time, to the good of others.

Slaves and Masters (Verses 18 to 21)

Many Christians were household slaves at the time Peter and Paul wrote their respective Epistles, and it would have been easy for such slaves to remain submissive to masters who were themselves gentle and kind. Peter's focus, however, was on loyalty and perseverance even in the face of unjust treatment. Jesus Christ has given us the underlying principle for any such relationship: "And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same" (Luke 6:33, KJV); and again, "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Matthew 5:46, KJV).

Paul, too, dealt with this subject, perhaps more fully still, in his Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians. In the final analysis, both employer and employee serve one Master, namely Jesus; Paul's advice is accordingly, "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men" (Colossians 3:23, KJV). When this is done, the intricacies of any master-and-servant relationship soon fade into the background, and the work itself becomes a pleasure.

On Suffering (Verses 21 to 24)

We may suffer for many reasons: some suffering is the direct result of our own sin; some arises from our own foolishness; some is simply the result of living in a fallen world. Peter, here, is writing of the suffering that comes as a result of doing good. Christ never sinned, and yet He suffered, so that we might

be set free; the sufferings of our Saviour were themselves part of God's own plan. All who follow Jesus must be prepared to face suffering for the sake of righteousness, and our aim and endeavour should be to face such suffering as He did, with patience, with calmness, and with the settled confidence that Jesus is in control of the future.

Conclusion

Peter ends this chapter by reminding his readers that, in the past, they were like lost sheep, lost to the wickedness of the world around them; but, being born again, they have now found the true Shepherd in Jesus, and should therefore live their lives worthy of Him. In summary: ridding oneself of every sinful inclination is a prerequisite for spiritual growth and maturity in the believer; the question before each one of us is how strong our desire for God's Word, the spiritual milk of our growth and maturity, truly is; God wants us, His holy priesthood, to offer ourselves as living, spiritual sacrifices, with a pure heart; unbelievers stumble over Jesus Christ, the very One who could save them and give meaning to their lives; when we are united with Christ as members of His body, we join in His priestly work of reconciling God and man, and our value comes from being one with Jesus, not from what we can achieve; because we are loyal to Jesus, we will often feel like strangers in a world that would prefer to ignore Him; it would be wrong for us to write people off because they have misunderstood Christianity, when instead we should show them Christ by our lives; in most aspects of daily life, it remains possible and desirable for Christians to live according to the laws of their land; whatever our calling, we should do it with all our heart, as working for Jesus, and not for men; and our aim and endeavour should be to face suffering as Jesus did, with patience and calmness, and with the settled confidence that Jesus is in control of the future.