

# *Blessed . . . . even in times of trial!*

## THE FIRST LETTER OF ST PETER.

### STUDY NOTES – NIGHT 2

#### *1 Peter 1:13-2:12*

#### *'Called to Holiness'*

The term *'Therefore'* in 1:13 marks the introduction of a new section of the letter where the writer moves to a call to action, to discipline, to hope and to holiness. Building on the dignity of their identity in Christ, he calls on the readers/listeners to live a life worthy of the dignity of their identity in Christ. They are called to respond to the new life they have received through a life that is worthy of their faith.

#### **1. The Call to Holiness.**

The call to holiness is a major motif running right through the letter. It is already implicit in the reference to their being 'sanctified by the Holy Spirit' in 1:2 but now it becomes explicit as he calls on the hearers to be holy as 'he who has called you is holy.' At Sinai, the Lord God was identified as the Holy One, who called on the Israelites to be holy: "*For I, the Lord, am your God, and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy.*" [Lev 11:44; 19:2] To be holy means to be different, to be set apart. The Israelites were a nation set apart for the worship of God alone. The same is true of Christians: they are called to be different in that their way of life sets them apart from the nations around them. Hence, they are 'exiles' [1:1]. Their values do not come from the world but have God as their source. The call to holiness represents an invitation into the life of God made gloriously possible by Jesus. As such, holiness is presented both as a condition or state granted to believers through Christ [1:4, 19, 23] and as a goal to which they themselves must aim [1:2, 7, 22]

#### ***Holiness as a gift***

- + 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' [1:4]
- + 'you were ransomed ..... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish' [1:18-19]
- + 'You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.' [1:23]

#### ***Holiness as a goal.***

- + 'to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood' [1:2]
- + '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 honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.' [1:7]
- + 'Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart' [1:22]

Continuing the Passover motif, the writer reminds the hearers that just as the Israelites were ransomed from slavery, so they have been ransomed by *'the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without defect or blemish'* [1:19]

Whilst the concept of holiness in the Hebrew Scriptures is often associated with separation – God's distinction from what is unholy or profane – in 1 Peter the writer insists that holiness is about more than separation. It embraces a more positive view of holiness that sees it not simply as an abstention from what is profane or unholy, what is not of God, but rather as the transformation of all that is not holy into something good and something that serves God. The quotation from Lev 19:2 *'You shall be holy, for I am holy'* deliberately roots and grounds holiness in the revealed nature of God and especially in Christ Jesus who came into the world, lived a certain kind of life, and in so doing, drew a people to himself. This people in turn is carried along in a life lived within the world but is ultimately joined to the life of Christ.

Therefore, holiness involves a separation from their former way of life and all that defiles by virtue of being contrary to God's will:

- + 'Do not be confirmed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance' [1:14]
- + 'Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.' [2:1]
- + 'Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul' [2:11]

but it also involves a positive response by the believer to the gift of faith and new life received in Christ Jesus:

- + 'Be holy yourselves in all your conduct' [1:15]
- + 'Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.' [1:13]
- + 'love one another deeply from the heart' [1:22]
- + 'Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles' [2:12]

## 2. Salvation as a gift of God

1 Peter presents salvation as the gift of the sovereign God. It is God who has *'chosen them'* [1:1] and *'destined them'* [1:1] to be obedient to Christ Jesus and to share in an imperishable inheritance that is kept in heaven for them *'a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time'* [1:5]. They have been ransomed by the precious blood of Christ [1:19]. Through Christ they have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and given him glory and through the resurrection their hope and faith are set on God [1:21]. They are called to set their hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring them when He is revealed [1:13] and are assured that they have *'been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable. God has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light'* [2:9]- again a reminder that their salvation comes from God.

Salvation as the sovereign work of God invites them into 'a living hope' that is rooted in the resurrection of Christ [1:21] and the living word of God [1:23].

The assurance of their salvation is repeatedly rooted in references to God's saving act of the resurrection. They have been given a *'new birth and a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'* [1:4]. Through the resurrection their hope and faith are set on God [1:21].

But they are also called to *'grow into salvation'* [2:3] and this 'growing into salvation' is closely associated with, and rooted in *'the living and enduring word of God'* [1:23] that was announced to believers. They are encouraged to nourish themselves, like newborn infants, with this *'pure, spiritual milk'* [2:2].

By accepting the gift of salvation brought about by the resurrection, and nourishing themselves with the living word of God, they are invited to become *'living stones'* being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [2:5-6]

Note the recurring emphasis on the living nature of faith and salvation .... *living hope* [1:3], *living word of God* [1:23], *living stones* [2:5].

### 3. The promise of an imperishable inheritance.

1 Peter uses the language of 'inheritance' to describe what is in store for Christians. Inheritance is no longer understood as a land promised to Israel but now is understood in the end time hope that lies in store for believers. The recipients of this letter are exiles and aliens in this world and their hope is directed to their future inheritance, an inheritance that was predestined before the beginning of time. This promised inheritance is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for them [1:4]. The crucial means to this living hope is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead [1:3,21]. Thus, the event of Jesus' resurrection makes the hope of future resurrection a present reality and becomes the basis for the future imperishable inheritance. The inheritance however is not only imperishable; it is also without blemish, it cannot spoil, it is 'undefiled.' At the end of the letter 1Peter echoes this promise when he writes: *'And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you.'*

### 4. Living stones and a holy people

1 Peter 2:4-10 is dominated by two biblical metaphors: that of **a living stone** [2:4-8] and **a holy people** [2:9-10].

The writer draws on several Old Testament texts [Isa 8:14, Isa 28:16, Pss 118:22] to illustrate his vision of Jesus as the living stone rejected by the builders but which has become the cornerstone. Believers should allow themselves to be built by God into a spiritual house to become a holy priesthood able to offer acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. The image presents Jesus as the model for believing communities. Just like Jesus, believers are chosen by God but rejected by humanity. Just as Jesus was rejected so believers must not be surprised if they too are rejected. But just as Jesus has been vindicated by God through the resurrection and become the cornerstone, so too they are called to trust that their trials will be transformed to victory and honour. 1Peter draws on affirmations about Jesus in order to illuminate and provide the basis for his hearer's own Christian existence.

The second metaphor of *a holy people* [2:9-10]. The true identity of Christian believers, contrary to the suspicion with which they are viewed by the prevailing culture, is revealed in four phrases.

*'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.'* [2:10].

These descriptions are all drawn from Exodus 19:5-6 and effectively mean that the privileges once conferred on Israel are now the privileges of the Christian Community. Yet, the writer makes clear that their election as God's people is not simply a matter of being *chosen from* but of being *chosen for*. They are called *'to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light* [2:9] and who has transformed them from not being a people at all [*drawing on Hosea 1:6-9 and 2:25*] into bring God's people [2:10].

### **5. A people called to witness**

1 Peter's rich theological understanding of the identity and dignity of the Christian believer, which dominates the opening chapters of the letter, are not simply an effort to console Christian communities in the face of trials and hostilities but rather seeks to move them to bear witness, *'to proclaim the mighty acts' of God* [2:9]. They are called to *'conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.'* [2:12].

This general call to witness creates a natural bridge to the next section of the letter that explores how Christians are to conduct themselves in a hostile world in specific circumstances.

### ***1 Peter 2:13 – 3:12***

#### ***'Christian conduct in a hostile world'***

2:13 develops this focus on how Christian believers are to conduct themselves and witness in a pagan world that is often hostile to Christians. The repetition of the phrase *'accept the authority of ...'* in 2:13, 2:18 and 3:1 introduce sections which speak of respect for civil authorities [2:13-17], how Christian slaves should conduct themselves, even when they are treated unjustly [2:18-15] and how Christian wives should treat their husbands and Christian husbands should treat their wives [3:1-7].

Despite being aliens and exiles in the world, despite being maligned, Christians are not to withdraw from the world but rather are called on to give a positive witness so that *'though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God'* [2:12]. By doing what is right they are called to *'silence the ignorance of the foolish.'* [2:15].

Given the dignity of their Christian identity they are called to a standard of conduct that can set an example for the neighbouring pagans in order to counteract their low estimation and suspicion of Christians. This advice must be read in the context of its own time and how society was ordered. There is no attention given here to changing the existing and social order, even when it is unjust, but only how to behave in the present situation in a way that exemplifies the patience and the self-giving of Christ.

The household codes, which were part and parcel of their ordered society are not rejected – rather they are reinterpreted in the light of the Gospel. Hence advice is given in particular to slaves and women who fare badly in that system (and who perhaps make up a large portion of the community of faith). Believers have already made a brave decision to join a despised foreign cult that is not the religion of their masters and husbands and which upholds their dignity in a way that current social norms do not. They are not invited to engage in social protest but to maintain their dignity in an oppressive system. ***The focus here is on mission rather than submission.***

#### Civil authorities 2:13-17

1 Peter upholds a positive respectful relationship with civil authorities and to accept the authority of same. Clearly 1 Peter reflects a very different situation to the Book of Revelation, where Christians are being actively persecuted by the state for refusing to engage in emperor worship. Yet, they are reminded also that they are '*servants of God*' [2:17] and called to live as free people. This freedom is not a freedom for licence but rather a freedom to live one's life under God's rule [2:16]. This section ends with some subtle but key distinctions [2:17]. Believers are to '*honour the emperor*' but it is the community of believers that they are called to '*love*' and God alone that they are called to fear or reverence. While '*honour*' is in many way an outward virtue, love as an inner virtue is required for the community of believers and fear or reverence is reserved for God alone.

#### Slaves 2:18-25

Here 1 Peter uses the literary form of 'household codes' common in New Testament letters [for example, Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Tim 2:8-15, 5:1-2, 6:1-2]. These lists describe the ethical obligations members of a household have towards one another.

For 1 Peter, belief in God should lead Christian slaves to accept their master's authority and to endure suffering even when innocent. The letter acknowledges the difficult lot of slaves but they are invited to view their unjust suffering in the light of the unjust suffering of Christ and to follow the example that he set. Jesus' suffering and death is presented in terms of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah [Isa 52:13-53:12]. Christ obtained salvation through suffering for sinners, so Christian slaves can bring others to salvation through the witness of their sufferings. No mention is made here of the responsibilities of masters towards their slaves. This may simply reflect the reality that there were few, if any, such believers in the community. However, the fact that the slaves are addressed directly and are addressed first implicitly acknowledges their Christian dignity. Whereas their masters view them as objects, the letter addresses them as subjects.

#### Wives and husbands

Again, the advice offered here must be read in the context and the social reality of its own time as its thoughts are rooted in the social structures and attitudes of the patriarchy of the first century. Wives are instructed on how to relate to their husbands so that they may win over their husbands to the Christian faith [3:1-2]. They are called to focus not on extravagant externals [3:3] but rather to cultivate a gentle disposition at peace with God and with one

another [3:4]. 1 Peter holds up the biblical example of Sara and the manner in which she respected Abraham as an example to emulate [3:6].

Husbands are asked to '*show consideration for your wives*' [3:7] .....'*so that nothing may hinder your prayers.*' While the prevailing cultural patriarchy is evident in the description of the woman as '*the weaker sex*', yet the equality of women with men is also implicitly asserted since in the new life of Christ '*since they too are also heirs to the gracious gift of life.*'

General advice.

This portion of 1 Peter concludes by addressing the entire community 'all of you' [3:8] with a list of five imperatives on how to treat one another so that they can live as a truly Christian community and the promise of a blessing from the Lord, quoted from Ps 34:13-17 which reminds them that '*whoever would love life .... must turn from evil and do good.*' [3:10-11]

### **1 Peter 3:13 – 4:19**

#### ***'A Christian attitude to suffering'***

1 Peter 3:13-15 shifts the focus on to the very real question of what ought to be the Christian attitude to suffering. '*But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,*<sup>15</sup> *but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord*'

Though innocent, Jesus suffered for the guilty. His death is the reason that the hearers and indeed all Christians are now able to approach God [3:18]. His suffering led to the ultimate experience of death. But death was not the end. Though 'he was put to death in the flesh, he was made alive in the spirit' [3:19]. The example of Christ's suffering and consequent triumph in the resurrection [3:21] gives hope to Christians who innocently endure suffering and hostility. Because Christ's triumph over the powers of evil and death is complete, Christians have nothing to fear. Christ has redeemed them and given them future hope through their new birth in baptism [3:21]. Just as God rescued the faithful Noah from the evil world by means of water, so too God liberates faithful Christians from the evils of the world by means of the water of baptism. Jesus' resurrection makes the waters of baptism effective and brings salvation to all who accept it. Through his resurrection, Christ shares God's power, and all authority in the universe is subjected to him [3:22].

This passage would have constituted a powerful message of hope and encouragement to the Christian community suffering hostility and alienation. Christians participate in Christ's death and resurrection through baptism and though they are suffering now, they too will share in his victory and resurrection. '*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin),*<sup>2</sup> *so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.* The letter stresses that Christians who lead a life of suffering with Christ must also avoid a life of sin and live according to God's will. Their lifestyle invariably distances them from the way of life of their Gentile neighbours with the list of vices in 4:3-4 reflecting the type of feasts that pagans celebrated and which the community used to participate in before they came to faith. The reference to the preaching of the good news to those who have died

[4:6] is best understood as an attempt to assure believers that those members of the community who have died now share in the victory of Christ and also '*live in the spirit as God does*' [4:6]. Many of the early Christians believed that Christ would return during their own lifetime and that the end of all things was near [4:7] and so the letter exhorts the community to live a life marked by prayer [4:7], love [4:8], hospitality [4:9] and service of one another. 1 Peter presents love as the central virtue '*because love covers a multitude of sins*' [4:8].

Since Christ showed that suffering was the path to glory, Christians should not be surprised if '*a fiery ordeal*' and greater sufferings come [4:12] and yet they are encouraged to rejoice for '*they are sharing in Christ's suffering*' [4:13]. If they are reviled for the name of Christ, it is to be interpreted as a blessing and a sign that the Spirit of God is resting on them [4:14-16]. The prospect of suffering should not cause fear or trepidation among believers; rather, it should be seen to be '*in accordance with God's will*' [4:19] and inspire them to '*to entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good*' [4:19]. This double emphasis on trusting in God even in suffering while continuing to offer witness to their contemporaries by doing good, which runs throughout the letter, is again evident here.

### ***1 Peter 4:20 – 5:11***

#### ***'General advice to leaders and the community'***

The letter ends with general advice offered to his fellow elders/presbyters [5:1-5] and to the community [5:6-11]. The letter invites the elders to take care of the flock, modelled on Christ, the chief shepherd [5:4]. The hearers are called to humble themselves [5:6], to cast all their worries on God [5:7] and to keep alert [5:8]. The need for watchfulness and vigilance is stressed in the memorable image of the devil as '*a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*' [5:8]. What First Peter's readers are experiencing is not unique because Christians throughout the world are enduring similar sufferings and persecutions [5:9]. They are however to take heart in the promise that Christ will support and strengthen them in their struggle [5:11].

### ***1 Peter 5:12-14***

#### ***Final Greeting***

The letter ends with personal greetings, perhaps added in the author's own hand. It is not clear whether Silvanus is the bearer of the letter or the secretary [amanuensis]. The reference to 'Babylon' is a code-word referring to the Church in Rome. The Christian greeting '*Peace to all of you who are in Christ*' ends the letter [5:14].