

The Lifestyle of the Exiles

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we come to your word now and ask that you would, by your Holy Spirit, be our teacher. That these words might shape us and challenge us and change us, that we might live for your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. One of the joys of being a vicar is you get to take loads of weddings. Looking forward to another one not so long from now.

And often there are traditional bits of music, one that's become quite popular recently. Particularly for the entrance of the bride is Parker Bell's Canon. And it is a beautiful piece of music, I'm sure you know it.

There are two main elements. The first is a ground bass of eight notes that repeats itself multiple times through the piece. And that goes like this. Above that, Parker Bell flips and flies with harmonic variations to create his masterpiece.

But without those two elements, it's not the same. The ground bass is vital and actually it's marvellous on its own. You find that repeated sequence in all kinds of bits of music. But when it sits underneath the lighter variations, well, the two combine into something really very special.

[1 : 23] Well, Peter does something similar in this section in his first letter. He interweaves the deep base of the glorious gospel of Jesus with a call for those who have received God's gift of grace to think and speak and act in a way that matches the character of the God who has saved them.

That second element has got many facets to it. But it's summed up in verse six where Peter quotes God's words to his Old Testament people. They appear three times in Leviticus chapters 11, 19 and 20.

Be holy for I am holy. We'll get to that part a little later. But as you notice, the section here begins with the word therefore.

If you're reading the Bible and you see a therefore where you need to work out what the therefore is therefore. And it points us backwards to what Peter has said already. We looked at this last week. See, in the first part of the letter, Peter encouraged his scattered readers, Christians around the world, who he calls exiles living in a broken, hostile world, to marvel at God's work of salvation, to rejoice in all that God has done for them through Jesus, and to remember that although following Jesus would be difficult and was proving difficult for them, their faith would ultimately prove worthwhile.

[2 : 44] He describes it in those early verses in chapter one as of greater worth than gold, as bringing inexpressible and glorious joy, bringing an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you.

As he does that, Peter's been laying down that ground base, extolling the wonders of the work of Jesus in bringing lost sinners to salvation. And he carries that on through this passage.

Let me pull out a few of the ways that we see those notes coming through. Verse 13, the glorious hope of Jesus' return is mentioned. Verse 15, Peter reminds us how incredible it is that a holy God should have mercy on people like us and draw us to himself.

Verses 18 and 19 remind us that our salvation came at the cost of the precious blood of Jesus. And verse 20 brings up something else that we saw last week, that this great salvation was not a last minute thought from a panic-stricken God who thought, oh no, the world's out of control, what do I do?

No, sending Jesus to be the sacrifice for our sin was his settled, perfect will, even before creation had been brought into being.

[3 : 59] Verse 23 reminds us that that change of state that God works in us, turning us from sinners to saints, from enemies of God to children of the Father, is no small thing. It's nothing less than a rebirth.

Maybe you balk up there or cringe at the phrase, but actually all Christians are born again. There is no other kind. And that new birth is something that only God can bring about.

What's more, as verses 23 and 24 remind us, although we live in a world that changes constantly, that is full of decay and disease and death and pain and suffering, God's promises and power and word do not fail.

They stand forever, guaranteeing that eternal hope. No wonder then, Peter says, that those who have this hope experience elements of inexpressible and glorious joy, because they are people who know, not just in their heads, but in their lives, that the Lord is good.

It's easy to take things for granted, isn't it, when they've been around us for a long time, whether it's the comfort of our homes or the quantity or quality of the food that we enjoy, the money in our bank accounts, things that are maybe more important as well, the freedom to worship, the love of a friend or spouse.

[5 : 18] It's not that we don't appreciate them, it's just that they're there all the time, they're part of the air we breathe. So we often have an unconscious gratitude. I think we can do that with our faith as well.

We know the truths, we believe, we've recited them in the creed. They have shaped our character and our lives. But sometimes as time goes on, well, our wonder and joy in Christ and his work can get diminished.

They get taken for granted. We don't spend much time thinking about them. They're just there. But they cease to thrill us as they once did. I wonder if that's the case for you this morning.

Whether somehow we've lost that sense of awe and wonder that Jesus was willing to die to save us. That although we are exiles in this world, one day he will come and take us to be with him forever.

That's all wrapped up in those base notes, that ground base that Peter has here. And they're worth dwelling over, meditating on, praising God for.

[6 : 23] And it's vital that we remember those things. Because if we fail to grasp the wonder of God's saving work of grace, then all the commands that come up in this chunk suddenly become heavy weights for us to carry.

Because the second theme that Peter gives here is a call for us to grow in holiness, to grow more like Jesus. To change our thinking, amend our focus, to live differently, to love courageously.

To have our words and attitudes transformed as we pursue more of Christ and grow up in our salvation. If we forget to dwell on what God has done for us, then these commands seem as if they're ways that we need to follow to achieve our salvation.

To earn our way into heaven. And since none of us can live like this all of the time, thinking that way robs us of our hope and joy and peace.

It crushes us under a weight of commands that we cannot bear. But that isn't Peter's point here. By reminding his readers that we are, by faith, we are already in Christ.

[7 : 30] That by God's grace we are already his children, already redeemed, purchased, born again. Peter is simply saying to his readers and to us, this is what you are, now live like it.

You are children of God, grow more like your father. You have that inheritance in heaven, begin to act more and more like citizens of that kingdom.

And wonderfully we don't need to fight that battle alone because God has not just placed us in church families to nourish and encourage and support us in our lives for Jesus.

He's also given his Holy Spirit to be in us. To work in us. And to work through us. To help us live lives as God's children. So let me pick out very briefly just five short ways that Peter encourages us to seek to live as born again Christians.

Christians who are in exile in this world as we wait for the kingdom to come. Well the first one is about our minds, a way of thinking we are to recognise that we are in a battle.

[8 : 36] The King James Version speaks of it as girding up the loins of your minds, which is a wonderful phrase. Now I've never tried to do that, I have to say. I've never tried to run in my robes, at least not in any long distance.

And that's probably just as well. I would probably end up flat on my face, looking in a terrible state. But if I did need to run, well I would need to gird up my robes. I'd need to wrap them up somehow, tie them round my waist, and then the legs are going to work. Those of you that are used to wearing long dresses know all about that. Well that's the image here. Peter says there's a race to be run. There's a battle to be fought. A work to be undertaken. So, says Peter, get your mind right. Fix it on the task ahead so that you don't get tripped up. Being a Christian is a joy and a delight, but it's a serious business. It can't be just a religious hobby to be taken lightly. Something to do on a Sunday morning. No, it's a battle. It's a race, a calling. And we need a clear mindset if we're to succeed. [9 : 39] Is that how we see the world and our lives as Christians? It's gird up our loins of our minds and be ready. Secondly, verse 13 again.

We're to be enthralled by heaven and set our hearts on the world to come. Verse 13 again. You and I are surrounded by so many things that can distract us from wholeheartedly following Christ. Wealth, possessions, pleasure, family, sport, hobbies, politics, holidays. Even those struggles of life, illnesses and pain and grief. All of these things, many of them great gifts of God, can take our minds off Christ and put on to things that verse 24 says will one day wither and fall. So, says Peter, get a heavenly mindset. Instead, be enthralled by heaven. Set your hearts on the world to come and the joy of one day being with Christ then you won't lose your focus. We might want to let the joys in this world be a little foretaste of the glory to come. The good things now will be so much better later. Perhaps, too, we can think when our pains and sorrows and struggles come that they whet our appetites for heaven when those things will be no more. [10 : 56] How can we cultivate that way of thinking and be enthralled by heaven? Thirdly, we're to pursue a personal holiness that conforms to the scriptures.

I think we'd all probably admit, if we're honest, that sometimes we can get rather lax in our efforts to pursue personal holiness. Sometimes we excuse our failings. It was just what I'm like. Just my character. Sometimes we blame it on others. Well, you made me do it. We give ourselves a free pass when we're tired. Or we ignore those commands which make life tricky.

Or would cost us friends or bring times of testing. And we just hope that God won't mind. But that simply won't do for those in Christ. We're to be holy as God is holy. Verse 25 tells us that the word of the Lord endures forever. Which means what he teaches in the Bible doesn't change. And so as children of God, we need to grow into the character traits that God has revealed through the Bible.

[12 : 02] True repentance demands turning away from sin and living God's way. Not just saying sorry and going back to those same failings and sins again. So does our sin grieve us as it should?

Later when we come to our time of confession, will it just be words that are said by rote? Or something precious to us as we receive again God's gracious pardon?

Are we growing more like Jesus? Or more like the world? Fourthly, we're to look inside at our attitudes and our words. Peter mentions this at the start of chapter 2.

I think sometimes it's easier to think we're living a Christian life when we can tick off a whole bunch of those Ten Commandments. But that's okay. I don't murder. I don't steal. I don't commit adultery. There are no false gods set up in the corner of my house.

We might even say, well, I'm a good citizen. I keep the speed limits. I always park where I should. I pay my taxes. And look at all the charity work that I do. But people who are outwardly living Christian lives can still have their hearts full of anger, of resentment, of jealousy and malice.

[13 : 13] And sometimes in unguarded moments, those attitudes of the heart come out of our lips and reveal what's inside. That's what hypocrisy is, isn't it?

Something different on the inside to the outside. We've seen it in our own hearts. We've seen it in the lives of others. And like a persistent weed, it needs to be dug out and purged from the gardens of our hearts, minds and characters.

And remember who Peter is writing to here. He's writing to Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. They're not just part-time believers. And yet these things are an issue for them.

They're affecting their worship and witness and their lives together as Christians. They need to get rid of them. And so do we. So when was the last time you peered into those dark corners of your heart and character and confessed them to God and asked for his help to change?

Lastly, it's about our desires. We're to crave more of Jesus and grow up in our salvation. It's all very well digging up the weeds from the gardens of our hearts.

[14 : 21] But we need to be careful. Because unless we replace those weeds with something good, well, new weeds just come back. Well, that certainly happens in my garden anyway. So Peter's last encouragement in this passage is to crave pure spiritual milk.

He's speaking about the unadulterated, unamended scriptures in all their glory and power. Think about the milk that babies need. They need the real stuff, don't they?

You wouldn't want to add some sugar just so it tastes slightly better for them. And you wouldn't want to drain out all of its goodness. No, no. They need the real stuff if they're to grow up strong. In the same way, we need to crave pure spiritual milk. The milk of God's words. So that by reading and marking and believing, inwardly digesting and obeying the scriptures, we grow up in our salvation.

So if I may, let me ask you a final set of questions. Are you more mature in your faith now than you were five or ten years ago? Do you know more of the scriptures now than you did then?

[15 : 27] Is your faith deeper? Your hope stronger? Your joy brighter? Your understanding greater than it was then? Have you stopped growing? See, if we have stopped growing in our salvation, then we're not standing still.

We're actually going backwards. Because we will have stopped growing in likeness to Jesus. Sin will have more of a foothold. We will lack more of the joy and peace and hope that flows out of Peter's pen in his letter and certainly shone out of his life.

But wonderfully, we don't need to stay in that situation. God's mercies are new every morning. There's always a day for a new start. Which is why Peter wrote to his fellow exiles to exhort them to this wholehearted, heavenly-minded, Christ-exalting, holy, loin-gilded, full-fat discipleship, where love for God and other believers overflowed from their joy-filled hearts.

If you desire that to be more true of you, then follow Peter's prescription. Fix your minds afresh on Jesus, on his cross, his return, his reign.

Draw closer to God in his word and prayer. Crave the pure spiritual milk of the scriptures and with God's help seek to live out your faith in holy, reverent fear.

[16 : 50] Then you will taste that the Lord is good. And even living as an exile in this broken world, the joy of the Lord will be your strength. May that be true for all of us in greater measure in these coming days.

Amen.