

I Peter: Persistence Through Difficulty

Session 3 1 Peter 2:4-25

I. 1 Peter 2:4-12

1. This section follows from 2:1-3. What happens when we desire Christ and take delight in him? What happens when we “grow up into salvation”. What happens, Peter says, is that the Church is created.
2. Christ is the “living stone” (2:4). At first, this may sound like a contradiction in terms since stones are anything but alive. Peter very likely has Psalm 19:14 in mind where God is “my rock and my redeemer”. “Living stone” holds together two images, the image of God’s eternal “living-ness” and the image of God’s eternal steadfastness. Note that Christ shares in these divine qualities. Christ is the foundation of the Church and this means that, ultimately, it is grounded in the life of the Trinity. Peter moves us to correct overly individualistic conceptions of the Christian life and helps us to see that individual and communal transformation cannot be separated. Christ is the origin, power and goal of the Church and Christian life. Peter also moves us to correct voluntarist notions of the Christian life (which hold that our decisions are determinative). He does this right away in 1:2. God’s prior action makes our action possible.
3. The “living stone” was “rejected by men” (2:4). In Luke 20:9-18 Jesus narrates this rejection in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. In Luke 20:17, Jesus cites Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”. The “living stone” came in the flesh and in vulnerability and was “rejected by men” (2:4). However, this is not the end of the story. While Christ was rejected by humans, he is “chosen” by God and “precious” to God. Being chosen by God and precious to God far outweighs human rejection, and in the Resurrection God rejects human rejection. There is probably an echo of Isaiah 42:1 here: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights”. Crucifixion is reversed by resurrection and ascension. What happened in the case of Christ will happen in the case of those who suffer in their witness to him.
4. In coming to Christ, in being drawn to him, Christians become “living stones”. We are not “living stones” on our own but only through participation in Christ and in the “temple” he is building—the Church. Note: Christ’s vulnerability and apparent weakness will be reflected in the situation of the Church which will also appear to be vulnerable, weak and ineffective (Jesus is taunted with his seeming ineffectiveness as he dies on the cross). The mission of the Church is to persist through difficulty.
5. Because he is completely united to God, Christ is the True Temple (John 2:19-21). He is also the great High Priest who offers himself as the acceptable sacrifice to the Father (Hebrews 9:11-14). In short, the whole of Israel’s worship comes to its fulfillment in Christ. Through grace and participation in Christ, we share in all that he has done and

accomplished. The Church can be the place of God's Presence because it shares in Christ the True Temple. The Church can have a priesthood because it shares in The Priest. The Church can offer "spiritual sacrifices" (2:5) because it shares in Christ who is himself The Sacrifice. All of this can be summarized in a fairly simple way: The Church exists to mediate the Gospel to the world, and she mediates the Gospel by embodying it. In Psalm 48, Jerusalem and the temple display the character of God. This is now the mission of the Church.

6. In 2:6 the terminology for Christ changes from "living stone" (2:4) to "cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22). In the ancient world, the cornerstone determined the whole orientation of a building. Christ is the cornerstone of the True Temple and as such he determines the proper orientation of human beings to God. It is impossible to be rightly oriented to God without him. The only choice here is that of either acceptance (2:6) or rejection (2:7). This is not an easy thing for the cornerstone was rejected by human beings and is, thus, a "stone of stumbling" and a "rock of offense" (2:8; cf. Isaiah 8:14). It is important for Christians to not become dulled to the scandal of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). To be accustomed to the Cross is to have not really understood it. The continuing question (challenge) for the Church is whether the "crucified cornerstone" truly establishes her orientation.
7. To be united to the cornerstone, to be oriented to God through him, is not to arrive at a private faith or a merely "personal salvation" but enter into a vocation. In 2:9 Peter virtually repeats the vocation given to Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:4-6; cf. Isaiah 43:20-21). The phrase "chosen race" (2:9) comes from Isaiah 43:20 and may strike us as pretentious or even dangerous. To be a "chosen race" (as the contexts of Exodus 19 and Isaiah 43 make clear) is to be not self-chosen or self-generated. God's people are always chosen by God for his service and sustained by God for the same reason. In other words, the existence of the Church cannot be explained in terms of either like mindedness or biological continuity (remember Abraham and Sarah!). The Church is a family the existence of which is solely due to God's gracious action.
8. The Church is also a "royal priesthood" (Exodus 19:6). In the Old Testament, the close association between kingship and priesthood reflected the inherent connection between religion and political order. The king's primary duty was to make sure that Israel's life was ordered by her faith. (Note that in Hebrews 7 we are told that the priest/king Melchizedek is a prefiguration of Christ.) As God's people, the Church is not simply a "spiritual" reality but has a visible presence in the world with its own particular politics and order. In other words, the politics of the Church are priestly, determined by Christ and oriented toward witnessing to Christ's presence in the world. As we think about what it means to be a "royal priesthood" we have to remember the King and Priest that the Church represents. The Church's authority is not derived from any earthly authority and it is not at the service of any earthly order. What Peter says here parallels Revelation 5:9 which sees the Church as a "kingdom of priests". Revelation 5:10 declares that these priests "shall reign on the earth". This does not mean that earthly power is simply replaced by Church power. The rule exercised by the kingly priests is primarily expressed through worship, witness and, even, martyrdom (note Revelation 5:11-14).

9. Peter also describes the Church as a “holy nation” (*ethnos*) in 2:9. Just as a nation is a fundamentally corporate, social and political entity, so is the Church. It provides an alternative way of living and living together. To be a Christian is to be part of this “holy nation”. This nation is holy not because each of its citizens is holy, but because it was created by the Holy God and exists for the purposes of the Holy God. The citizens of the holy nation are God’s “own possession” (2:9). This is a holy nation because it has a holy calling (2:9); its citizens are called to holiness (1:15). This is a people which lives in God’s light (2:9) and under God’s mercy (2:10).
10. As “sojourners” and “exiles” (2:11), Christians are called to live against the “passions of the flesh” which means those desires which are counter to Christ’s rule (note 2:1). What Peter has in mind is certainly expressed in Ephesians 5:1-20. The rejection of the “passions of the flesh” is a sign of the rule of Christ. While we often think of Christian morality as a matter of “being good,” Peter offers a different vision. For him, Christian morality is fundamentally about bearing witness to God (2:12). To put this in terms set by Galatians 5, the politics of the world and the “passions of the flesh” yield what Paul lists in Galatians 5:19-21—disorder among people. By contrast, the politics of the priestly kingdom is supposed to yield what Paul call the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23.

II. 1 Peter 2:13-17

1. Peter now considers what it means to live by the “ethics of witness” in daily life. At first glance, the imperative to be subject “to every human institution” (2:13) does not sound very encouraging. Does this imperative give too much authority to governments? And what about corrupt or wicked governments? Here, subjection does not mean unquestioning obedience but something rather different. Christians are placed within societies and these societies have governments. It is not the mission of the Church to compete with, undermine, serve or be in alliance with governments. Christians must recognize that all governments are human creations and while they can do good things they are not be regarded as ultimate authorities. (It is important to note that the Roman Empire presented itself as a divinely authorized reality.) The Greek verb here means something like “do not withdraw from”. “For the Lord’s sake,” Christians are not to withdraw themselves from human institutions.
2. Christians have an approach to government which begins with the realization that the are “exiles” in their lands and that they live under The King. They are “obedient children” of God (1:14) before they are citizens. Their first mandate is to “do good” (2:14) by being a “holy nation” (2:9). “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” (2:12). It may be that Christians will be misunderstood and criticized but the steadfastness goodness of their lives will reveal misunderstanding and criticism to be without force. “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (2:15). The culture surrounding Christians may misunderstand and even misrepresent them, but their lives should be conducted in such a way as to reveal the falsity of such misunderstandings and misrepresentations.
3. 2:16 is crucial. The Roman world was divided into the free and slaves. Peter erases this social distinction by saying that all of God’s people (even if they happen to be

slaves!) are free; they are free because they participate in an order which transcends all human social orders. Christians are free from understanding themselves as their societies understand them. The freedom possessed by God's people is always a freedom to serve God and not a freedom to "do what I want". This follows the model of the Exodus.

4. 2:17 is also important. The idea of that everyone should be honored would certainly have gone against Roman norms and it reflects the "transformation of the imagination" that Peter is creating. Note that "everyone" here would have included slaves and the idea of honoring slaves would have seemed absurd by Roman standards. Also, note the contrast between "Fear God" and "Honor the emperor". Reverent fear (meaning something like awe) is due to God alone while the emperor (a human political figure) may be honored (like all other people!). Christians live in various societies and while they are not to withdraw, neither are they to be over-awed or fundamentally shaped by them. Peter advocates for the forming of a "culture of the Gospel" within the Church.

III. 1 Peter 2:18-20

1. Peter now gives specific instructions for Christians not to withdraw from society. The first instructions are given to slaves (although the ESV uses the word "servants"). Some people find it problematic that Peter seems to accept the institution of slavery in that he says nothing about its abolition. It is important to note what he has said in 2:16. Christians (all of them!) are to live "as free people" and as "slaves of God". Peter is saying that the social label "slave" should not define Christian slaves because in Christ they are free. And all Christians are "slaves of God".
2. While we may be sensitive to Peter's failure to call for the abolition of slavery, we need to see things from the vantage point of Greco-Roman culture. Peter is being radical in that he is not only saying that being a slave is not an obstacle to being a Christian but also that as a Christian one is primarily a "slave of God" and, therefore, not a slave to a human master.
3. Christian slaves are called to what Greco-Roman culture denied them: moral and spiritual agency. Christian slaves are called to respect their masters not because they are superior human beings (as Greco-Roman culture taught) but because they are called to bear witness to their faith or to be "mindful of God" (2:19). Christian slaves may endure suffering (like Christ!) but they are to suffer unjustly: "But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God" (2:20).
4. While Christian slaves may have no "rights" and no power (according to Greco-Roman culture), this is the real truth of their lives. The truth is that they are "free people" who are "slaves of God". Note that Peter does not address masters here. This may be because there were few masters in the churches to which he is writing. (Ephesians 6:5-9 addresses both slaves and masters but what is said to both is prefaced by 5:21.)

IV. 1 Peter 2:21-25

1. While this section seems to be addressed to slaves, it could also be intended for all Christians and this is because “slaves” has a twofold meaning for Peter. It refers to both actual slaves and to all Christians (2:16). The two can not be neatly separated.
2. 2:21 indicates that the reason for the counsel given in 2:18-20 is being made clear. All Christians are subject to “suffering unjustly” (2:19) and, therefore, not all suffering can be said to be due to some form of divine punishment. The archetypal instance of this is Jesus Christ and Peter may have Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in mind here. In the figure of the Suffering Servant, which early Christians regarded as a prefiguration of Christ, we see a contrast between the horrendous suffering this figure endures and his righteousness. The Suffering Servant suffers precisely because he is righteous. In fact, his suffering results in the purification of Israel (Isaiah 53:4-5).
3. Peter presents suffering as part of the calling (1:1; 2:21) of Christians. It is not an aberration or something to be avoided at all costs or something simply to be “gotten over”. When Christians suffer because they are living for God, they are imitating Christ and, thus, living into a pattern of Christoformity. In this sense, Christ set the example and we “follow in his steps” (2:21).
4. Peter gives Christ’s suffering two distinct but closely related interpretations. Christ’s suffering is both exemplary and atoning and these two must not be separated (though they often have been). Christ’s suffering is exemplary in that he provides an example of what Christian suffering looks like. Note the contrasts on 2:23: Christ was reviled but did not revile, he suffered but did not threaten (revenge). Through both physical and spiritual suffering (and it is important to note that latter was greater than the former) he “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:21). The foundation of Christ’s righteous suffering was his unwavering trust in God. Christ completely trusted in the judgment of God. This closely parallels what Paul says in Romans 12:17-19. Unjust suffering calls for trust in the righteousness of God. The worldly will be consumed with anger and revenge because they do not acknowledge the justice of God. Unjust suffering requires immense spiritual strength.
5. Christ’s suffering is also atoning, and in this sense, he cannot be imitated. Peter offers two images to help us understand atonement. The first is that of Christ bearing our sins on the cross which has the effect of allowing us to die to sin and to live to righteousness. This image is very much in keeping with Romans 6:5-14. In this image, Christ takes the effect of sin upon himself so that it is removed from us (this is the logic of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16). With Christ’s death, we die to sin and are enabled to “live to righteousness”. The second image is that of healing. Here, sin is presented as a (fatal) disease from which Christ’s death and resurrection heal us. This image is close to John 3:14 (cf. Numbers 21:9). Both images make an important point: Christ’s death (and resurrection) make the transformation of human beings possible.
6. Peter is clearly drawing on Isaiah here and in 1:25 he alludes to Isaiah 53:5: “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”