

Peter's Epistles #19

Spiritual Rebirth

(also available on-line at www.ICHTHYS.com)

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Introduction: With this lesson, we return to our exegesis of 1st Peter. We have just completed a rather lengthy digression on the subject of spiritual growth, occasioned by the close of Peter's salutation in verse two: "grace and peace be multiplied to you". With these words (as we have seen in the preceding lessons in an extensive discussion of spiritual growth), Peter states his wish for an increase in God's favor (grace) toward us, and for our inner, spiritual well-being (peace). Increased grace and spiritual peace are both significant results of spiritual maturity. Hence, when Peter wishes these things for us, he has it in mind that his "wish" can only be fulfilled if we accept the challenge of personal, spiritual growth. One result of this salutation is to make it clear that the paragraph immediately following (the doxology of vv.3-9) is linked to the preceding wish. Peter, a believer who is following the mandate to grow spiritually, now praises God for the "living hope" he possesses in Christ Jesus. We too may appropriate these words, and fix our hearts on this same hope, provided we are likewise moving forward spiritually.

Doxology (vv. 3-9): In his doxology (a Greek word meaning a speech of praise or glorification), Peter glorifies and praises God in a way that imparts important scriptural information to his readers. Hung upon the wish for spiritual growth in verse two, the doxology is a detailed account of the three main foci of *virtue thinking*, delivered in the form of a hymn of praise to God. Peter treats the three cardinal virtues in the order hope, faith, and love:

Verses 3-5: The Living Hope

Verses 6-7: Suffering Sharpens Faith

Verses 8-9: Christ, the Object of our Love

Translation of 1st Pet.1:3-5:

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised, who has in His great mercy caused us to be reborn *to a hope* which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, and *to an inheritance* which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us, who are ourselves also being kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him *to an ultimate deliverance* ready to be unveiled at the end of time.

The Living Hope: These next three verses direct our attention to a virtue which is an important factor in spiritual growth: hope. As we have seen in previous studies, virtues are important foci

for our thinking, pathways of thought which help to keep us focused on Christian attitudes and behavior appropriate to our high calling. Virtues, when we concentrate our minds on them, help to crystallize for us entire categories of truth, and remind us of the all the important principles they touch. The virtues are an important means of interpreting the events of our daily lives, and of accessing and applying pertinent biblical truth. By concentrating our thinking on the virtue of hope, for example, we can bring back into focus all the important principles related to the eternal realities, wondrous things which transcend the tedium and testing of life.

Hope shifts our gaze away from the deceptiveness of the world around us and reminds us that we have another life, a better, eternal life waiting in heaven for us. The Bible has volumes of important information on this subject, but, in verses 3-5, Peter concentrates on three crucial aspects of hope. All three of these aspects are treated in a parallel fashion which is unmistakable in the Greek text, and therefore highlighted in the translation given above. Peter links each of these aspects to the new life we anticipate (and, in Christ, possess now), and introduces each of them with the preposition *eis* ("to"). By the mercy of our God, we have been reborn:

- 1) to a living hope (v.3)
- 2) to an indestructible inheritance (v.4)
- 3) to an ultimate deliverance (v.5).

The living hope of verse three directs our gaze to the resurrection body in which we shall enjoy our eternal life forever; the indestructible inheritance of verse four reminds us of the rewards of eternity which neither moth nor rust shall ever destroy; the ultimate deliverance of verse five encourages us that we shall "stand" at the last judgment, if in this life we have but maintained our faith (cf. Ps.1:5).

Furthermore, each of these three aspects of hope parallels one of the three transformations of the Christian life (cf. Col.1:13). As we saw in lesson #13, these transformations (or "sanctifications") are the scripture's way of describing the Christian's progress in "holiness", that is, our transformation from the realm of the profane to the realm of the spiritual. We start out "holy" by virtue of our position in Jesus Christ, the "Holy One" (positional sanctification) we end up entirely "holy" when at the resurrection we shall have no trace of our old sinfulness in the new bodies we then receive (ultimate sanctification); in between, we should be striving to shed the influences of sin and corruption that we may live a "holy" life (experiential sanctification). This intermediate transformation (in contrast to the initial and final phases of sanctification) is dependent upon all the decisions we make day by day; experiential sanctification is, therefore, essentially synonymous with spiritual growth.

So the deliverance of verse five speaks of the security we presently enjoy (and anticipate) by virtue of our position in Jesus Christ (positional sanctification); the living hope of verse three with its focus on the resurrection reflects our confidence in our final glorious transformation (ultimate sanctification); the indestructible inheritance of verse four is our hope of reward based upon spiritual growth and the production which stems from it (experiential sanctification). Each aspect of hope expresses a definite confidence of good things to come for those who love Christ

Jesus and follow Him faithfully in this life (Rom.8.28), being not conformed to the world around us, but transformed according to God's plan for each one of us (Rom.12:2).

Praise (v.3): When Peter says in verse three "May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised", he is encouraging us to direct our appreciation and thanksgiving to the One responsible for the blessings outlined in the doxology which follows. The word translated "be praised" in verse three is the Greek *eulogetos*, which (along with its corresponding verb *eulogeo*) is always used in the New Testament as an equivalent for the Hebrew word *barach* ("to bless"). The Hebrew word originally meant "to kneel down", and is most likely derived from the word *berech*, or knee. As is often the case in Hebrew, however, a particular posture came to be associated with the activity which accompanied it (as *todah*, or "thanksgiving" may originally have meant "to throw [one's hands in the air]" as a gesture of appreciation). As one knelt before a superior or anyone to whom deference was owed, the words spoken at the time would certainly be kindly and favorable. Thus both the Hebrew and Greek verbs come to mean "to speak well of, to praise, to bless". They can also be used to ask a blessing from God, and when God "speaks well and kindly" to someone, there is usually a concrete benefit or "blessing" that results. Some Old Testament "blessings" (Jacob and Joseph come to mind) were more than mere requests, because the one who requested or invoked the blessing also had a prophetic gift from God. Today, when we "bless" someone, we are asking for God's blessing upon him.

Peter's request for us to "praise God" is emotional, and we should not separate the joy and emotion from the meaning here, but it is also very important to note two further points:

1) In addition to occurring within reasonable bounds, the praise requested here is not meaningless, empty emotion. Rather it is joy and appreciation based upon solid scriptural truth. We know why it is we are praising God, and we direct our minds to something very substantial, thus supporting scripturally correct thinking with appreciative emotion (cf. 1Cor.14:18-19).

2) The praise commanded here serves to refocus our attention upon God, and as such is a very conscious and controlled display of emotion. The basis for our praise is our appreciation of Him as the source of the spiritual growth (whose discussion precedes) and of our "living hope" (whose treatment follows). By directing our appreciation and thanksgiving toward God, Peter deflates any possible subjectivity that may have arisen on our part. We do need to examine our spiritual progress and look forward to the fulfillment of our hope, but we need always to remember that this is God's plan, and that we are merely participants in it by His grace and for His glory.

Mercy (v.3): In 1st Timothy 1:2 (compare 2Tim.1:2 and 2Jn.1:3), in an introductory greeting very much like the one Peter opens with in this epistle, Paul wishes grace, mercy and peace for Timothy, thus adding "mercy" to the two words of blessing employed by Peter. "Mercy" is also used by Peter in this epistle, added here in verse three to explain God's attitude in giving us new life. Mercy expresses the forgiveness aspect of God's character in blessing us, while grace and peace express respectively God's giving and our receiving and reciprocating. To wish someone grace, mercy and peace, is to invoke the entire cycle of God's blessing: the free favor of God the

giver (grace), upon those qualified for it through the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ (mercy), resulting in spiritual fulfillment for those who receive it through spiritual growth (peace).

These three words also correspond to the three primary virtues of faith, hope and love. **Faith** believes in the grace of God. **Hope** looks forward to the mercy of God. **Love** goes hand in hand with the peace of God. **Faith** reaches out to accept the free grace of God expressed in the gift of His only Son, Jesus Christ (2Cor.9:15; Eph.2:5-9), thus appropriating the gracious promises of God (as when Abraham believed God's promise to bless him with an heir: Gen.15:6). **Hope** is our confidence in our eternal future, our deliverance from judgment and our inclusion in the resurrection based on God's mercy and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Eph.2:4-5; Jude 21). **Love** for and from God is the hallmark of spiritual maturity and produces an inner peace which this world can neither produce nor understand (Jn.14:27-31).

Humility plays a major role in orienting us to the giving character of God and acts as a link connecting faith, hope and love to grace, mercy and peace. Since faith cannot be separated from humility (1Pet.5:5-6), when we trust God to handle our problems, we must necessarily recognize our own inability to solve them, and rely instead on the gracious and giving nature of God (Eph.2:8-9). Likewise, our hope humbly and confidently grasps the principle that God's forgiveness (and hence our deliverance) is not based upon anything we may have done, but rather He has saved us by His mercy (Tit.3:5), and this mercy falls to those who pay Him the proper, humble respect (Lk.1:50). Finally, James characterizes true Christian peace in terms very similar to the law of love in the Spirit explained by Paul (compare Jas.3:17-18 with Gal.5:14-26). As we gain peace through spiritual growth (1Pet.3:10-12), and in humility learn to leave our problems to the Lord (Matt.6:25-34), we are freed in our hearts from the cares of this life, and free to reflect the love of God to others.

Rebirth (v.3):

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he is not able to see the kingdom of God". John 3:3

Jesus' remark to Nicodemus is a categorical one as is indicated by His doubling of the solemn Hebrew phrase *amen* (lit. "in truth", i.e. worthy of belief): without "rebirth", or "being born again", we are not able to enter the eternal state, God's kingdom. Entrance into eternity requires a major change in us. The life we were born with the first time is not enough. We must be "born again" to acquire new life, the eternal life that can only come from faith in Jesus Christ. Now our current bodies, being mere earthly flesh and blood, cannot possibly survive until or exist in the eternal kingdom (1Cor.15:50). We must have a new body to embrace this new life. By connecting the idea of being "born again" in such a direct way to entrance into God's eternal kingdom, our Lord points to this truth. When we are "born again", born a second time by the Spirit not the flesh (Jn.3:6), we possess this new life positionally (that is, we have a full and forceful claim upon it by virtue of our secure position in Jesus Christ), but we do not actually yet experience it to the full. Our experiential enjoyment of the eternal life that is given to us at our new birth will only come when our new bodies match up with the new truth (the new life) we

now possess. That is, we will only fully experience the reality of our new life at the resurrection. The resurrection body is the new body that will house our new life (imparted at the new or second birth when we are born again). By being "born again", we do have new life and are assured of the new body that will one day complement it. By being "born again", we are assured of entering the kingdom of God.

Being "born again", according to Christ's comments in this context (as well as all other passages of scripture in which the concept occurs), is a reference to the new life we have in Christ, that eternal life which is ours now by virtue of our faith in Him and identification with Him, and which will be ours to experience in full when our present mortal bodies take on immortality at the resurrection. Therefore we, although qualified only for death by our first birth (Rom.5:12-14; 1Cor.15:22; Heb.9:27; cf. Ps.51:5), through our faith in Jesus Christ have been born "again", and have passed from death (the imminence of judgment and the second death) to life (eternal life, possessed here and now and fulfilled at the resurrection: Jn.5:24; 1Jn.3:14). Therefore, to be "born again" means to possess a new, second life; that is, the eternal life given by God to all who believe in His Son (Jn.3:15-16). As believers, we possess this eternal life positionally here and now (1Jn.5:13) as a pledge of the future experiential acquisition of eternal life when our present corruptible bodies are raised in incorruptible form (1Cor.15:53-55). So we who are "born again" are "new creatures" (2Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15; Eph.2:15; 4:24). We are both reborn now by our faith in God's Word (Jn.3:36), but also look to the future when we shall realize the fruits of our eternal life in the new bodies God has promised to us:

If therefore you have been resurrected with Christ, seek the things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Seek the things above, not the things on earth. For you have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, your life, appears, then you too will appear with Him in glory. Colossians 3:14

The eternal life we possess is "hidden away safe" with God. When He who is our hope, the Lord Jesus Christ, appears in His glorious return to earth at the 2nd Advent, then we too shall be clothed in glory, the glorious reality of our new, eternal bodies, the everlasting vessels for our eternal life. In the passage above, then, both elements of the new birth, our present "positional" new life in Christ, and the future fulfillment of it through resurrection, are prominent.

Other passages of scripture discuss the subject too of course, illuminating additional aspects of our new life in Christ. The vehicle of this new birth is the Word of God. In James 1:18, it says that God has "begotten us by the Word of truth" so that we might be a kind of "first-fruits" (a reference to the coming resurrection; cf. 1Cor.15:23). Later in this book (1Pet.1:23), Peter tells us essentially the same thing as James, proclaiming that we have been "born again not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living, enduring Word of God". As the Word of God endures forever, so we too who have that eternal seed of truth in us now will come to see it sprout and blossom into the wondrous body that will be our eternal home forever (1Cor.15:35-41). The ultimate security of the believer "whose seed remains in him" is affirmed by John, and refers to this same seed of the life-giving truth of the gospel of Christ forming the pledge of eternal life within us (1Jn.3:9): as long as we believe in Him, that truth in us is a seed which

guarantees the timely sprouting of our eternal life at the resurrection (compare 1Jn.4:7; 5:1; 5:4; 5:18).

As our verse in 1st Peter says, God in His mercy has "caused us to be born again to a living hope". Our hope is to defeat the grave by resurrection and eternal life. Through our faith in Jesus Christ whose atoning work has cleared the way for our forgiveness, we possess even now the eternal life which is our guarantee of that blessed resurrection. By the salvation ministry of the Spirit we have been "made new" and "reborn" (Tit.3.5). We have not been born only once (the end of which is death), but we have been "born again" (the end of which is eternal life), possessed now, but fulfilled at the coming resurrection (Matt.19:28).

It is this hope of resurrection and reward to which we have been "reborn" (1Pet.1:3); it is this hope which "anchors" to heaven (Heb.6:19) and sets our sights on the things above (Col.3:1-4); it is this hope which challenges us to make our lives here on earth "new" just as we anticipate the new heavenly life that shall one day be ours (Eph.4:22-24).

When Peter says we are "born again", he means we have acquired eternal life, and the hope to which we have been born again is the hope of seeing this eternal life we now possess (through being born again by our faith in Jesus Christ) fulfilled in the resurrection of this earthly body into a new, eternal body in which we shall live with God forever. In this way, "death shall be swallowed up in victory" (1Cor.15:55), the victory over the grave accomplished by the resurrection of the body through our faith in Christ. In the new birth, (and in the pledge of the Holy Spirit, Eph.1:13-14) we have a meaningful assurance of this future reality. In the following lesson, we shall discuss what the Bible has to say about this resurrection.