



A Faithful People

November 22, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

2 PETER 1:3–15

PRINTED TEXT:

2 PETER 1:3–15

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

—2 Peter 1:3

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

2 PETER 1:3-15 (NIV)

1³His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. ¹⁰Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ¹²So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. ¹³I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, ¹⁴because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. ¹⁵And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

INTRODUCTION**A. TO STOP GROWING**

When I was in high school, I hurt my knee playing football. The X-rays showed the damage, which was eventually corrected by surgery. The X-rays also revealed something else. In technical language that I did not understand, the doctor said my knee was fully formed. This meant that I would not grow any more.

In other words, I was about as tall as I was ever going to get, even though I was only 15 years old at the time. I would never reach 6' in height. Instead, I would have to settle for 5'11". This was a difficult pill to swallow, because my older brother was 6'2", and I had always assumed I would match or exceed him. Furthermore, my favorite sport was basketball, but I knew that my success there would be limited because of my lack of height.

All of us eventually quit growing vertically (although we seem to retain a propensity for horizontal growth). This is a simple fact of life, and it is largely determined by our genetic makeup. It is tragic, though, that some Christians cease to grow in spiritual stature. An early growth spurt may give them modest spiritual height. But then, for some reason, they stagnate. They reach the point of not having new spiritual thoughts or insights for many years. The great truths of the faith become commonplace and stale for them.

Other Christians, however, seize opportunities for lifelong growth that the faith affords. They become spiritual giants, continuing to add to their growth until death takes them. Peter was one of these. He seemed to have been a giant already when he preached the first gospel message on the Day of Pentecost, shortly after Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:14–36). We do not know how old Peter was at that time, but our best guess is that he was in his mid-30s.

By the time Peter wrote the second letter that bears his name, over three decades had passed. Peter was surely near age 70. He had no regrets, and his primary concerns were to remain faithfully obedient, to keep growing in Christ, and to pass those challenges along to others.

Whatever our physical age today, we do not have to settle for stunted spiritual growth. The spiritual life is such that it can be renewed and refreshed. Growth can begin again, even after a long period of inactivity.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

The book of 2 Peter includes some interesting features. First, it is written in a style of Greek very different from 1 Peter (although this may not be apparent to readers of English translations). Peter notes that his first letter was written with the help of Silas (1 Peter 5:12). Silas, a companion also of Paul, seems to have been an educated Jew from a privileged background, for we know he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:25, 38). We speculate that his help with 1 Peter provided the polish to that letter.

Peter's second letter, however, seems to have been written quickly, under great duress, and with no help from anyone like Silas. Peter himself wrote down the words rather than passing them over to someone else to edit. The style of 2 Peter is terse and direct, with few literary niceties.

A second thing to notice is the remarkable eyewitness recollection of Jesus' transfiguration found in 2 Peter 1:16–18. Here we find the same basic elements included in the Gospel accounts, but without the part about Peter's clumsy suggestion to build three "shelters" or shrines for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (Matthew 17:4). It is not too surprising that this embarrassing detail had faded to the background for Peter!

A third prominent feature of 2 Peter is its frank discussion of what has been called “the delay of the second coming” (see 2 Peter 3:3, 4). The earliest church apparently expected Jesus to return very shortly. Peter, writing from the perspective of more than three decades after he first met Jesus, has come to grips with the distinct possibility that the second coming may not happen during his own lifetime. This will be discussed more fully in next week’s lesson.

We should treasure these words of Peter, for they are the unrivaled message of a veteran believer at the end of his ministry. He brought to the table his experiences about the Lord Jesus as few in his generation could do—and certainly no one can do today. May we listen to him carefully.

I. GIFTS OF FAITH (2 PETER 1:3–9)

A. PRECIOUS PROFUSION (VV. 3, 4)

3. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

As the apostle Paul faced his death, he celebrated the fact that he had “kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). In a similar vein, Peter begins his letter with a reminder of the importance of remaining faithful to Christ, no matter what the future may bring. There is no other option in Peter’s view.

In this light, Peter wants to talk about the nature of God’s gifts. Peter divides those gifts into two categories. First, there are gifts that provide *life*. For example, Jesus had taught Peter and the other disciples to give thanks for daily bread (Matthew 6:11), the necessities for living. Second, God has granted us what we need for *godliness*. The Christian does not need to guess about what constitutes the godly life. We have been provided with Scripture and teachers to guide us in this area. God gives us what is needed for physical and spiritual nourishment.

Peter also discerns two purposes for God’s gifts to us. First, there is the issue of God’s call in relation to his *glory*. Thus our call is not an issue of personal fame or status in this life. Also, this is a glory yet to be revealed (see 1 Peter 5:1). It is this hope of glory that

makes it possible for us to endure present sufferings (1 Peter 4:13).

Peter also commends the gifts of God that contribute to *goodness* or virtue. This is closely connected with the godliness already mentioned. Peter develops this theme further in verse 5, below. Peter reminds us that these gifts come through our *knowledge* of Jesus. He is not talking about book-learning, but about knowing the Lord through a personal relationship.

4. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Although not well known, this verse identifies one of the greatest of God’s gifts to believers: the Holy Spirit. Peter describes our relationship with God’s Spirit as participating *in the divine nature*. As Paul put it, the Holy Spirit is God’s “seal” or down payment toward our full redemption at the end of life (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

Some Christians are very cautious in this area of doctrine. While we don’t want our discussion of this to become too convoluted, we should not miss the tremendous significance of what Peter is saying. As believers, we receive the promise and the experience that we are directly plugged into God at the spiritual level. He is not distant from us or foreign to us. This indeed is a *very great and precious* promise.

For Peter, the practical aspect of the gift of the Holy Spirit is that it allows us to *escape the corruption and evil desires of the world*. This describes the longing for ungodly things, preoccupation with pursuits other than God. If we have claimed the promises and gifts that come through faith, our primary focus will be on God and on doing his will. All other things pale in significance to this glorious relationship. It is this strong faith that allows Peter and his church to remain faithful through the horrible persecution by Rome.

B. SEQUENCED DEVELOPMENT (VV. 5–8)

5–8. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;

The New Testament writers elsewhere present the path of spiritual development as a series of steps. As such, one step builds on another (see Romans 5:3, 4; James 1:3, 4). Peter does not minimize God's role in our spiritual formation, but Peter also expects his readers to *make every effort* in these matters. Spiritual growth is not an automatic thing for the Christian.

For Peter, this sequence necessarily begins with *faith*. We add to this *goodness*, which Peter has already listed as a gracious calling of God (v. 3, above). The virtuous life was sought by the ancient Greek philosophers, but it is truly realized only through faith in Jesus Christ.

The third step on this growth journey is *knowledge*. This is the ongoing expansion of one's familiarity with the ways of God and the elements of godly love. We cannot obey if we are ignorant of the expectations.

6, 7.... and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

Christian *knowledge* should lead us to *self-control*, sometimes translated "sobriety."

This is more than physical soberness resulting from avoidance of alcohol or drugs. Peter is speaking of a general attitude of moderation, of not being controlled or carried away by the things of the world (compare Galatians 5:23). Our *perseverance* in this separation moves us to *godliness*. This refers to the lifestyle that conforms to the expectations God has for his holy people. Living the godly life should imitate the great, merciful nature of God himself. The life of godliness will be evident in our *kindness* and care for our brothers and sisters within the church as well as acts of *love* for those outside the body of Christ.

8. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All of these steps work together. When we begin to see loving-kindness and acts of mercy flow naturally and effortlessly in our lives, we have begun truly to live the mature, spiritual life that Peter wants for all of his readers. This is the level of faith that Peter knows to be necessary to survive the onslaught of persecution and testing that comes to each believer. This is just as true today as it was in the first century.

C. FAITHLESS NEGLECT (V. 9)

9. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

The gifts of God that Peter has described come to the faithful. Now Peter comments on the other side of the coin, the faithless. These are the *blind*, who lack discernment. This is an interesting illustration, for faith is the requirement for trust in that which cannot be seen (see Hebrews 11:1). Here Peter is talking about those shortsighted members of his church who fail to see the goal, the ultimate prize of faith (see Philippians 3:14). These folks have *forgotten* that their *sins* have been *cleansed*

by the blood of Christ, and that salvation has been given to them, even eternal life (see Jude 21).

II. ASSURANCE OF FAITH (2 PETER 1:10–15)

A. FACT (VV. 10, 11)

10. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

How can we know for sure that we will be saved (that is, *never fall*)? For Christians, this is where the doctrine of assurance comes in. While we may have not yet experienced all the promised outcomes of our faith, that faith allows us to be assured of their trustworthiness.

The teachings of the New Testament say with one voice that we cannot earn salvation, because salvation is a gift. Yet we are also taught that acceptance of this gift comes with responsibilities and expectations. We have chosen to make Jesus the Lord of our lives and to live for him. It is by giving diligence to our side of the gift that we make our *calling and election sure*.

We create the assurance of salvation that our hearts crave by living out our faith; notice that vital word *if* in the phrase *if you do these things, you will never fall*. We are not caught between faith and doubt; we choose faith. Peter knows this from his own commitment and life experience. He testifies with great personal credibility that such a life will not fail.

11.... and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Peter reminds his readers yet again that we never need doubt God's side of the gift of salvation. For those who have true, obedient faith, a way *into the eternal kingdom* (Heaven) has been provided. This portal was forged by our spiritual trailblazer, *our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (compare Hebrews 2:10).

For Peter, the assurance of this salvation lies in the fact that Jesus is already there waiting for us. Peter can remember vividly that on the night Jesus was betrayed he promised his disciples that he was going to "prepare a place" for them (John 14:2, 3)—a place in Heaven.

B. REMINDER (VV. 12–15)

12–15. So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have.

Peter knows that the great truths of the faith that he has been rehearsing are not new; his readers already *know them*. This does not make them less important, however. We are strengthened when truth is repeated. This is why we repeat pledges frequently. This is why we have favorite verses of Scripture that we quote again and again. This is why we have confessions of faith that may be repeated in unison by a congregation.

Peter has just reminded the readers that persecution becomes more tolerable when we remember that our ultimate destination is Heaven. He is careful to tell them, however, that faith must be based on the known, not speculation about the future. We have a sufficiency in the *truth* that God has provided, the truth that we already have of our salvation, which was won through the cross and empty tomb of Christ.

13, 14. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me.

Peter's *tent* is his earthly *body*, the current housing of his person (compare 2 Corinthians 5:1, 4). Peter writes with full awareness that his life on earth is nearly finished, for this has been revealed to him by the risen *Christ* (compare John 21:18, 19).

15. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

While Peter is at peace with this future, he is not content to ride out his last days in idleness. He is determined to use every remaining minute in ministry to encourage his flock with the great truths and promises of the faith. In so doing, he understands his influence as a great example to the believers (compare 1 Peter 5:1–4).

The New Testament does not always paint a flattering picture of Peter (example:

Galatians 2:11–14). There is a sense in the Gospels that Peter’s denials of Jesus after his arrest constitute a betrayal that is somewhat of a parallel to the act of Judas. The parallelism ends, however, as Judas commits suicide and Peter is restored to ministry by the Lord in the threefold question about his love (John 21:15–17). Following that, Peter never lost his faith in Christ and passion for service to him. These Peter maintained until his death, for he, as Paul, was truly “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20).

CONCLUSION

Products and services to delay or mask the effects of aging are a multibillion dollar industry. One of the most amazing of these is the Botox® phenomenon. This technique involves injecting small quantities of a powerful, paralyzing poison to decrease wrinkles and other aging signs. This and other things have caused some to say that “age 60 is the new 40.” Even if some of the effects of aging can be postponed or hidden, the march of the years ultimately cannot be stopped. We all grow older every day. One of the most startling things in life is the realization that other people think you are old.

We have all met people who seem to be elderly when they are still quite young, however. Their souls have fossilized long before their bodies have begun to decline. We have little control over the aging of our bodies, but we do have control over the decline of our souls. Peter promised that the Lord would provide “times of refreshing” if we put our faith in him (Acts 3:19). Even when we are ancient in body, our relationship with God can be “new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23), for he is ever faithful. He is both the “Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7:9) and the immortal “King eternal” (1 Timothy 1:17). In him the obedient Christian’s future is secure.

RELIABLE PROMISES

My wife and I enjoy watching old movies. Recently we were watching *You Can’t Take It with You*, one of the well-known movies directed by Frank Capra, done in 1938. At one point in the film, Anthony P. Kirby, a powerful banker, is in the midst of pulling together an amazing business merger. He decides to make his son the president of the new corporation, but one of his subordinates had promised that role to another businessman in order to get his signed proxies.

“Tell him it was a mistake,” said Kirby. “We have his signed proxies; there’s nothing he can do about it.”

“But I promised him,” protested the unfortunate subordinate.

“It’s not in writing,” responded Kirby. “Forget it.”

Thus the promises meant nothing to Kirby. The promises were only a means to an end, the consolidation of his own power.

Promises are precious things. All parents remember those distressing times when we make a commitment to our children, and then we are unable to fulfill our commitment because of

extenuating circumstances. Our child's "But you promised!" becomes an uncomfortable prick to our conscience, perhaps for years to come.

How blessed we are that God's promises are surer than all human promises! When God makes a promise, we don't have to worry about whether he will honor his word. It is impossible for him to do otherwise. In addition, he controls all extenuating circumstances, so nothing can deflect him from fulfilling his promises.

OF FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

Clement of Alexandria was one of the key individuals in the church around AD 200. As an intellectual leader of the church in Egypt, he was concerned about fighting one of the most serious heresies facing the church at the time: the false teaching of *Gnosticism*.

The Gnostics taught that the most important thing in Christianity was knowledge (in Greek, *gnosis*, thus their name). If you had the correct intellectual understanding about spiritual things, then it did not matter what you actually did. Knowledge was salvation. The body was physical and therefore corrupt; of course it was going to do evil things. But knowledge was salvation.

Clement felt he had to fight this misconception. But at the same time, he wanted to make Christianity appealing to the intellectual classes of Alexandria, those inclined toward philosophy, even Gnosticism. Clement emphasized the importance of faith. He affirmed that even the simplest believer is saved. But the believer given to intellectual inquiry will want to go beyond simple faith to more advanced understanding. Thus Clement denied Gnosticism ("knowledge is salvation") while rehabilitating the concept of knowledge in true Christianity.

Clement did this by building on the stair steps of 2 Peter. "Add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge." We are not saved by knowledge; we are saved by faith in Christ. But knowledge becomes an important mark of spiritual maturity and development as we advance beyond the elementary basics. Your knowledge of God and his Word is either stagnant or growing. Which is it?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. In what ways has God provided for your needs for life and godliness? Why, how, and when do you express thanks to God for these gifts?

2. How do you live life as a partaker of God's divine nature, as Peter understands that concept? How can you do better?

3. In what ways are you being diligent in adding godly qualities to your life of faith? How will you do better in developing such qualities?

4. How well are you doing in making "your calling and election sure"? What can you do better in this regard?

5. What are you doing to put others in remembrance of the things taught in the Bible? How can you do better?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. In what ways has God provided for your needs for life and godliness? Why, how, and when do you express thanks to God for these gifts?

God provides the necessities of life to both the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45). The evil do not recognize this fact, so they do not give God thanks. Christians fall into this pattern of thinking when they believe they have earned the good things of life on their own.

When we thank God for the provisions of life, the focus shifts from self to Him. What better way to express godliness than to recognize God as the giver of all good things? The unrighteous can be influenced for God when they see lives that express this attitude.

2. How do you live life as a partaker of God's divine nature, as Peter understands that concept? How can you do better?

Too often it seems that Christians focus on their weaknesses instead of on God's strength. Sometimes when a Christian gives in to temptation quickly, he or she justifies the behavior by stating that "this is just the way I am."

But the fact of Scripture is that we are *more* because of the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us. When we allow the Holy Spirit to convict us and guide us, we can walk in a godly way. This requires taking time to study God's Word. That's how we discern the principles of godly living. It also means listening to counsel or rebuke from a brother or sister in Christ, as this may be God's way of directing us.

Taking time to think before speaking or to consider consequences before acting are paths to a more godly life. An worthwhile adage is "If in doubt, don't." That doubt about doing something may very well be the Holy Spirit's pricking one's conscience at a time of temptation.

3. In what ways are you being diligent in adding godly qualities to your life of faith? How will you do better in developing such qualities?

Some well-meaning believers have taught a doctrine that emphasizes that human good works just get in the way of God's working. This doctrine results in a spiritual passivism that says Christians should not concern themselves with working toward any state of godliness, but instead should allow God to form that godliness in us.

This doctrine may cause people to be apathetic in their spiritual development. Yet Peter's words provide an incentive to get to work on spiritual growth. Personal and group Bible study provides a means to do this. Taking time regularly to reflect on the qualities mentioned in today's passage, to recognize and confess where we lack, and to ask for strength to make study a priority of daily life lead to spiritual growth.

4. How well are you doing in making "your calling and election sure"? What can you do better in this regard?

Paul makes it plain in Ephesians 2:8, 9 that we do not earn our salvation by performing good works. But in the next breath he points out that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Thus the outgrowth of a faith that saves is good works.

The Christian life is to be built on a faith that results in works. This means taking time, even *making* time, to serve others. An assessment of our spiritual gifts will direct us in our path of service (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4).

5. What are you doing to put others in remembrance of the things taught in the Bible? How can you do better?

An unfortunate thing that happens in the church sometimes is in thinking of our faith as a private matter. Thus we do not talk about how God is using us; if we do, we fear that we will appear to be boasting.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we are humbled when we consider the enduring faithfulness of your servant Peter. What an example he both was and is! He loved your Son Jesus until the end. May our lives too have the evidence of Peter's dogged faithfulness, since his faithfulness never gave in, never gave up, and never gave out. We pray this in the name of the pioneer of our faith, Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.