

The Home of True Life

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[0 : 00] Well, for those of us whose Farsi isn't quite up to scratch yet, I'll read in English. And Peter's writing, of course, to a people that he says in chapter 1, verse 3, have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And he says here in verse 22, Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you've been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

For all flesh is like grass, and its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls. But the word of the Lord remains forever.

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So, putting away all malice and all deceits and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[1 : 50] For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

So the honor is for you who believe. But for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and the stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to the passage we read there at the beginning of 1 Peter, 1 Peter chapter 1, and these verses at the end of chapter 1.

[3 : 24] And as we do that, let's pray. Our Father, we thank you that we can come into your presence with gladness and joy, with confidence, and with a sure and certain hope because of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have forgiveness of sins and redemption by his blood.

And so, Lord, as we gather in your presence now, we bring you our prayer, which is that you would open our minds, open our eyes, and open our hearts that we might hear you and that we might understand your glorious gospel better, more truly, more deeply than before, and what it means to be your holy people.

Help us, we pray, and help us to bend the knee to love you and to serve you more. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. I want to ask the question over these next few weeks, what is the church?

It's a pretty important question, but actually it's a question that an awful lot of people are rather confused about because, I guess, to probably the average person out in the street in our city today, if you ask them about churches, what they will immediately think about is historic buildings, buildings like this one that we're sitting in this evening.

[5 : 09] I recall reading the obituary of the actor Donald Sinden, who died a few years ago. He was a Shakespearean actor, a theatre actor. We probably know him best from some of the TV things that he was in, like Two's Company and so on.

But I was rather surprised. I enjoy reading these obituaries. I was very surprised, actually, in reading all the different things that he did in his life, to discover that supposedly he was an expert in

ecclesiology.

I thought that rather strange. So I thought I'd better verify it. I looked it up and discovered what it meant. What it meant was, of course, he was a great lover of church architecture.

And he actually wrote a book on English country churches. That's what the obituary writer thought ecclesiology was about, the study of churches, church buildings.

They've even discovered that there is a journal of ecclesiology. And it is entirely devoted to church buildings. That's just how confused people are with that word, the church.

[6 : 13] You know, in William Tyndale's famous English translation, first great English translation of the Bible, he consistently translated the word ecclesia in the New Testament, not as the word church, but as congregation.

What a difference there might have been. What a lot less confusion there might have been among all the people of our nation if Tyndale's translation had survived into the King James Version. But it didn't.

Well, somebody may know, like Donald Sindon or like Simon Jenkins, another one who writes books about church buildings. Somebody might know an awful lot about the architecture or church buildings, but unless they know the things that the Apostle Peter is talking about when he is speaking about what the church really is, then he is no expert on ecclesiology.

In fact, he probably knows very, very little about the church at all. Nor, for that matter, does somebody who might be able to talk endlessly about traditions and institutions and denominations and matters of clergy and church government and all the other sorts of utterly tedious things that people often mean when they are referring to church or ecclesiology.

These things, no doubt, have a place, but the truth is that the New Testament is almost totally uninterested. in any of these things.

[7 : 46] Because the New Testament is focused on when it speaks of the church is something far, far more fundamental. What the New Testament is interested in when it teaches about the church, what the Apostle Peter is focused on in this letter here in front of us is something that's living, something that's everlasting.

He's speaking about the household, the living household of God himself. and he's telling us that that is the place and indeed the only place of true life and of true love in this world.

It's the only place of true worship and it's the only place of true witness to God. And Peter has absolutely no interest whatsoever in matters of institution, of structures, of denominations, or any of these things.

And the only building that he is actually interested in when he talks here is the building he talks about in chapter 2, verse 5, do you see, which he calls a spiritual house. One that's made up of living stones that's being built by God himself into a people of living worship and witness. So William Tyndale, in fact, was perfectly correct to translate the word ecclesia as congregation, as the gathering. God's gathered living people living to praise and worship him.

[9 : 22] And what Peter's talking about in these verses that we read together is the authentic church of Jesus Christ, the universal church, the fellowship of Christ's people worldwide, on earth and in heaven, which finds its true expression in every place, large or small, where there is a gathering together, a congregation, in a believing community of real people who are living under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who is the chief cornerstone, a head, and only head, of his church.

So when we ask the question, what is the true church and where is the true church to be found? Unless we find the things that Peter tells us are the essential marks of the true church, then it doesn't matter of what, about structures, about order, about government, about building, about anything else that we might have.

It'll never be an authentic church in the truly biblical sense of the word. So you can have a very historic institution going back centuries.

You can have very classical buildings that are magnificent. But unless you have what Peter is talking about here in these verses, it will never be a real Christian church, not at all.

Without the people of Christ and the gospel of Christ, all it can ever be is an empty shell. It can be an architectural monument. Of course, that's the crisis that we're seeing today all over the Western world in our own country in the historic Christian denomination, struggling desperately to keep empty buildings open.

[11 : 13] I read recently that in Aberdeen, in the Church of Scotland, Presbytery in Aberdeen, there are about half the number of church buildings they have, from 30 down to 15 in one fell swoop.

When I lived in Aberdeen just over 20 years ago, there were nearly 50 parish churches. Already down to 30, it's going to be halved. And soon it'll half again. And most of those will be nearly empty. Church of England, you're constantly here in the news, the crisis in keeping all these parish churches open. The problem is, of course, if you focus on the buildings and not on the people, eventually you'll lose the buildings as well, wouldn't you?

Because there aren't any people. But by contrast, wherever and whenever you have a gathering of believers in the name of Jesus Christ, people who are committed to him and therefore who are committed to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, in love and obedience to God, then there is the church of Jesus Christ.

Whether you're meeting in a great big building like this or whether you're meeting under a tree with just three or four. And there you will find the presence of the living God, the Spirit of Christ, right in the midst of his people, a living temple of true worship.

[12:35] So we're going to spend the next few Sunday evenings just making sure we're absolutely clear about what the authentic church really looks like and what it is according to Peter's description here in this passage that we read from the end of chapter one to halfway through chapter two of 1 Peter.

Of course, there are many other descriptions of the church in the New Testament. Paul talks about the church in other ways as well, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and so on. But here, Peter gives us four pictures of the true church as the home of true life, as the family of true love, as the people of true worship, and the people of true witness, and as the temple of true worship.

And we're going to look at these four pictures over these next evenings. But tonight, I want to focus just on verses 22 to 25, right there at the end of chapter one, where his picture here is that the church is the home of true life.

Let's just read again from verse 22. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God. For all flesh is like grass and its glory like the flower of grass. Grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

[14:20] This word is the good news, is the gospel that was preached to you. If you look back at the first part of chapter one, you'll see that Peter's focusing all through it on the believer's true hope.

So in verse three, he says, you've been born again into a living hope through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That is, you've been born into life everlasting.

And our hope of life is our salvation, which if you look at verse five, it says, is to be revealed at the last time. That is, as verse seven puts it, at the revelation of Jesus Christ when Jesus returns.

So we're to set our hope fully, he says, on that day. That's what he says in verse 13, on the grace of eternal life which will be brought to us at the return, at the revelation of Jesus.

So in verse 21, he says that our faith and our hope for life everlasting is in God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory, gave him glorious life.

[15:32] And our hope is in him because he has promised, he says, that we shall share in that glorious resurrection life forever. So every Christian believer, he says, has been born again into that living hope, into that hope of life that is everlasting.

And that's the believer's new hope, isn't it? And therefore, he says, we share that hope with every other who has that hope in Jesus Christ like we do.

The faith that's brought us into that living fellowship with God has also brought us into living fellowship with one another who love God. There can't be, can there?

There can't be authentic salvation without creating the authentic church, our brothers and sisters in Christ. And our new true hope has brought us into a new and true home.

And that home is the home of the hope of life. It's the home of true and lasting life. That's why you see from verse 13 of chapter 1 onwards, you'll see that there's so much family language there.

[16:49] We've become God's children, he says, in verse 14. Verse 17, we call God our Father. And therefore, of course, we find ourselves inescapably, as verse 22 puts it, among brothers and sisters to show sincere brotherly love to one another.

Chapter 2 begins the same way. It talks about babes, newborn infants, verse 2, growing up and being built together into one glorious household.

It's all household language, family language, isn't it? And the first focus, as you'll see in verses 22 to 25, is on the wonderful truth that this household is the home of new life, life everlasting. Life, verse 23, that is imperishable, that is abiding. So what's the nature of this life he's talking about?

How do you become part of this home of life that's everlasting? Well, the Apostle Paul uses wonderful language, doesn't he, when he talks of this?

[18 : 01] He talks about adoption. We're adopted, brought into God's family home. It's wonderful language, it's deeply personal. It's nothing cold and legal and just forensic about it.

It's wonderfully relational language that Paul uses. But actually, Peter here uses even more graphic language. He says that we've been born anew, or begotten anew, he says, by God's own seed. Chapter 1, verse 3, remember, he says we've been caused to be born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But look at verse 23 here. We've been born again, we've been begotten, he says, of imperishable seed.

So Peter describes this new life as the planting of a living, imperishable seed. That's the first half of verse 23. And that comes about through the preaching of the living, enduring word.

That's the second half of the verse. So let's think about each of these. in turn, first of all, the planting of an imperishable living seed. We're born, he says, or we're begotten anew into this everlasting life.

[19 : 21] That's how John puts it, do you remember, in his gospel in chapter 1. Very similarly, born, he says, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God.

That's what chapter 1, verse 3 of 1 Peter reminds us. It's all of God's doing. God fathers us into being.

It's according to his great mercy he has caused us, he has caused us to be born again into a living hope.

God has fathered us with his own seed, which is not like, says Peter here in verse 23, not like the seed of human life, which is perishable.

That's the sad truth, isn't it, for those of us who have fathered children. We know that we've passed on to them the gift of life, but we've also passed on to them at the same time the sentence of death.

[20 : 24] Our DNA is both the code of life, it'll shape what our children look like, it'll shape their aptitudes, it'll shape all sorts of things that we're quite oblivious to, poor things.

But it might also carry, mightn't it, genetic predispositions to disease, to deformities, all kinds of things. And with certainty we know, don't we, that our seed that we pass on is not the carrier of everlasting life.

Our seed can impart life, but only life that is perishable. But by contrast, verse 23, God's seed is imperishable.

Imperishable. It carries not only new life, but a wholly new kind of life, true life. Life which has been purified of everything that pertains to the perishable.

And life which is energized by everything that pertains to that which is imperishable. Now notice, Peter speaks here both of the negative and of the positive.

[21 : 40] Verse 22, he speaks of purifying your soul, purifying your life. That's the negative. It's like when somebody has blood cancer.

sometimes they have a bone marrow transplant. And their own marrow, their own marrow which makes new blood cells, is purified first by powerful drugs, chemotherapy, so that all of that disease-producing tissue is utterly destroyed.

And then comes the transfusion in of new life-producing marrow back into the body to begin making new healthy blood.

God. And that's what's happening, says Peter, when the human heart is touched and affected and changed by the Spirit of God.

There's a putting away of the old through the forgiveness of sins and we're cleansed. We're declared right again. We're justified is the biblical word in God's sight.

[22 : 45] faith. But when a prisoner is justified, declared not guilty, then immediately the door of the dock is opened.

The door of the prison is opened. And there's release, there's redemption, isn't there, through forgiveness. And a new life of freedom begins. And that's the wonderfully positive side.

That's what it means to become a Christian believer. when God has declared you to be forgiven, his seed is planted in you.

And that is a source of wholly new life. His life, his life which is everlasting life, imperishable, says verse 23. Because the corrupt marrow of our sin has been transplanted, done away with, and replaced with the life-giving marrow of God's own Son.

And that's the glorious positive. 2 Peter chapter 1 says that through the wonderful promise of the gospel of Jesus, he says, we have become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

[24 : 07] Our old nature put away and we've received the nature of a new life, God's own life. John says, very similarly in his first letter, he says that the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil, and that no one who is born of God any longer makes a practice of sin because God's seed abides in him.

He's been born born of God into a new life. We belong to the home, to the household of true life, life which is imperishable because it's an everlasting work of God's own creative power.

And that's the main point, isn't it, of Peter's quote from Isaiah here in verses 24 and 25. All flesh is like grass. Its glory is just perishable.

The beautiful flowers, even the most beautiful, they don't last, they wither, they fade. It's so depressing, isn't it, at this time of year? You've got leftover pots in your garden from last summer. If, like me, you never got around to cleaning them out and they're just lying there like dead plants, things that were beautiful, full of flowers, just a few months ago, brown, drooping, decaying, and dead.

[25 : 33] And he's saying, just like that, our lives, our earthly lives, our physical lives, are perishable.

Frail as summer's flowers, we flourish, but blows the wind, and it's gone, says the hymn. But of course it goes on, but while mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on.

And so will we, says Peter, and so must we, if we have been born of God's imperishable seed. Because the word of the Lord, he says, remains forever.

And that brings us to the second thing here that we must be clear about. Because we come, says Peter, we come to belong to the home of true life, a planting of the living, imperishable seed of God in us, it happens through the preaching of the living and enduring word.

We've been born again, he says, through the living and abiding word of God. See how Peter here virtually identifies the imperishable seed of God's own life-giving life.

[27 : 01] He almost identifies it with the word of God. That's actually quite normal for the New Testament. Listen to James, James chapter 1, verse 18. Of his own will, God brought us forth by the word of truth.

That we should be the kind of first fruits of his creatures. Is he begotten, born, brought forth by the word of truth, by the living and abiding word.

Now, people sometimes get confused with that language because they tend to naturally associate the new birth with the Holy Spirit. Remember John chapter 3, Jesus speaking to Nicodemus about being born again, born from above, born by the Spirit.

And, of course, in Acts chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, Peter calls on the crowd and says, repent, and you also will receive the gift of the Spirit. And so, of course, we tend to think of the new birth as being born by the Holy Spirit.

Well, of course, that is so. Because it must be a spiritual, a supernatural work of God by his Spirit to bring anyone to life, to bring the dead to life. But if you read on in the Acts of the Apostles, you'll find, very interestingly, that Peter equates receiving the Spirit of God with receiving the Word of God.

[28 : 28] In fact, if you'll turn with me to Acts chapter 10, I want you to see this, just because it's so important and very helpful to do it. Acts chapter 10, you'll remember, is the story when Peter is preaching the gospel to the household of Cornelius.

Look at Acts chapter 10, verse 42. Peter says, having been asked by Cornelius to speak to them and to pass on the gospel, he says, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he, Jesus, is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. And while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who

heard the Word.

As he was preaching the Word, the Holy Spirit was poured out for their salvation and for new birth. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.

And they said, can anyone stop us baptizing these people? But look at verse 1 of chapter 11. Look how that verse describes what has just happened.

[29 : 51] And the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God. You see, verse 47 says they received the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 11, verse 1, they received the Word of God, the Gospel. And that means, if you look down to chapter 11, verse 18, which just puts it in yet another way, it means God had granted them repentance that leads to life, life eternal.

You see, receiving the Holy Spirit, receiving the Word of the Gospel, being granted repentance unto eternal life. It's all different ways of saying exactly the same thing.

It's about being born anew into the living hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. And of course, that's right, isn't it? Because you can't ever separate the work of God's Spirit from the instrument of the Holy Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Ephesians chapter 6 says take the sword of the Spirit, the offensive, powerful weapon of the Spirit of God, which is the Word of God. And that's exactly Peter's emphasis here in his letter, isn't it?

[31 : 09] Look what he says, verse 22, you are purified through obedience to the truth, God's Word. Verse 23, you are begotten, you are born of God by his imperishable seed, the implanting in you of his own life by the Spirit that comes through the living and abiding Word of God, and no other way.

And that's how everlasting life, that's how the imperishable life of God himself is planted in human beings through the living and abiding Word, which is the sword, which is the instrument of the Spirit of God of salvation in our world.

And that's how the church is born. This is quite literally what Peter is describing here, back to 1 Peter 1, is church planting. This is how the New Testament actually talks about church planting. Not as many people tend to talk about church planting today, which is just taking people from one place and putting them in another place. That's not church planting. If it's anything, it's transplanting, isn't it? Taking a part of a church that's already there, putting it in another place. There might be very good reasons for doing that, for the sake of evangelism and so on. But this is real church planting. Planting new life of the Spirit of God through the gospel of God in people's hearts, which brings them into their true home forever and ever.

[32 : 37] The home of life. The home that is shared by all who share the life-giving Spirit of God through the gospel. But notice that for that to happen, for God's sovereign, life-giving begetting to take place, the living word of God must be proclaimed and it must be received, it must be obeyed.

Look at verse 25. This is the good news that was preached to you, but look at verse 22. Your souls were purified by obedience to that truth.

It was received. That's what the Bible means by faith, isn't it? Which is the real obedience of faith, trust, and submission to the word of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So you see, it's only where the living and the abiding word of the true gospel is proclaimed and received with obedient faith, that new and abiding life can be begotten, can be born, and can grow and flourish.

So unless there is the proclamation of the living word of the gospel, the biblical apostolic gospel that Peter's speaking about here, the unchanging truth, unless there's that, there can be no seed of God imparted, can there?

[34 : 03] There can be no begetting of new eternal life in the human heart. There can be no planting or nurturing of the true church. It's very simple. You can pretend, I suppose, you're planting a church or preserving a church by having a building, by having structures, by having organizations, having anything you like, but if there's no gospel, there's no life because there's no seed of God and therefore there's no church.

Just the empty shells, as I said, of so many of the older churches of our nation today. Or even just the vibrant but equally empty vibrancy of something new that has begun that is equally devoid of the true and living gospel of Jesus.

It's worth asking, isn't it, is my church really a church in the sense Peter's talking about. But even if you have an orthodox gospel proclaimed, that word is heard but not received, not obeyed, it is just lip service to that living and abiding word.

If you're a hearer just, not a doer, then as the apostle James says, then you're only deceiving yourself, aren't you? No, you must receive, says James, with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your soul.

And that and that alone is how you become part of God's church, part of the home of true and everlasting life. He plants his life-giving imperishable seed in you to beget you as a child of his own. [35 : 54] You can't beget yourself, can you? That's obvious, quite impossible. It's the Spirit of God who gives life to whom he will and only to whom he will. But, says Peter, you must obey the truth when it comes to you.

Unless there's surrender to his lordship, there won't be any purifying of your soul. There won't be any forgiveness. There won't be that new birth and new life.

So, friends, I hope all of us here know that we do belong already to the home of true life. But if not, well, Peter's told you what to do, hasn't he?

Hear and obey the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we all know, don't we, from what Peter says here, how we're to bring others to new birth and to new life and find their place in the home of life everlasting.

God plants his living and imperishable seed as we proclaim his living and enduring words. Very simple. Look at verse 24.

[37 : 04] That's us, isn't it? That's all of us here. That's all the people that you know and that you love. They're like grass. We're like grass. We're already fading bodily, aren't we?

And they and we are going to wither and die. But, verse 25, the word of the Lord remains forever and it gives life forever to those who submit in obedience to his truth.

And that's the gospel, the good news that's been proclaimed to them and to us today. have you purified your soul, your innermost life by obedience to the truth in Christ yet?

If you haven't, that must be your absolute priority for this new year, 2020. And it must be, mustn't it, the great priority for all of us as a church in 2020 to preach that word to others, to proclaim it to all of those that we love, but who are like grass and whose lives are withering without it.

Because God plants his living, imperishable seed to give that everlasting life. And he does it as we proclaim his living and enduring word.

[38 : 39] He's put into our hands as the church. He's put onto our lips the keys that open the door of God's home of everlasting life.

What a wonderful privilege that is. And what a great responsibility for us all. Well, let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the God of life and that although we are a people so conscious of our weakness and that we also are fading and perishing.

We praise you that you have caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

We thank you for the imperishable seed that you have planted in our hearts through your gospel.

And we pray, Lord, that you would help us to be those who go on planting with you that imperishable gospel of hope in others, many others, all through this coming year together and all through our lives, to the glory of God the Father and the praise of the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.