

4. A People for God Alone

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[0 : 00] Now, if you'd like to turn in the Bibles on the pews to page 1014, our particular passage today is chapter 2, verses 9 to 12, but I'm going to begin reading in verse 4 of that chapter.

So we're going to read 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 4 to 12. And Peter writes, And 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 a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do. Then our passage for today, this little passage, verses 9 to 12. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

You may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

[1 : 49] Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Amen, and may God bless that his word to our hearts and to our minds. I don't know how many of you have been watching the program Diamond Queen, which has been on the last three weeks on Monday evenings, a very fine and very moving portrait by Andrew Marr of Her Majesty the Queen as in her 60th year of her reign.

There's also an excellent book by the same name, also written by Andrew Marr, who's a very, very good writer, very sharp, very perceptive, very witty, able to say a lot in a few words.

One of the things he said on Monday evening was, towards the end of the program, he said the Queen has not achieved her position by intrigue or by fighting, either by political or any other kind of fighting. She is simply there because of the family from which she came.

[3 : 23] And because of that, she doesn't have anything to prove. She simply is, and of course, what she has done over those 60 years has been marvelous. Long may she reign. And it seems to me that that is the kind of idea we have here about the family of God. Peter is not saying, try your hardest to become a member of the family. Do your very, very best, and you'll maybe make it into the family.

Peter is saying, if you're a Christian, you are in the family. It's not a question of trying to be in it's not a question of working towards it. If you're in the family of God, then live like a member of that family. Now, of course, we know, and the program didn't attempt to water this down, there have been failings and faults in the royal family as in any other family, as there are in the family of God. But our subject today is a people for God alone. God's family, the people who belong to him by grace. And just two points I want to make. First of all, we have an amazing privilege in verses 9 and 10.

That's the first thing. And then secondly, we have a challenging call in verses 11 and 12. So that's all the amazing privilege, but you are a chosen race. Now, this contrasts with verses 7 and 8, those who reject, those who will not believe. What Peter is saying, grace has called you into the family, called you to the living hope, called you to the holy life, called you to the trustworthy Savior.

It's been our subject in the last few weeks. And it's rich, as this whole letter is with Old Testament quotations, called you to the people of God, which has been there right from the beginning. People of God didn't begin on the day of Pentecost. The people of God began right at the beginning, when God called his first people, and it continues today. So one people of God from beginning to end. Now, this amazing privilege then really falls into two parts. First of all, what we are. A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. Now, chosen refers back, of course, to verse 4.

As you come to him, a living stone, come to Christ, rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious. Chosen means called to be part of Christ himself, part of his body. Christ, who in the sight of God is chosen and precious is chosen and precious. That's the first thing. A royal priesthood. A priest's task is to represent God to the world, and the world to God. That's the dual task. That's what the Old Testament priesthood did, and all God's people are now priests in the new covenant. And you are a holy nation.

[6 : 47] Now, this is not a nation with national boundaries. This is a nation which has no national boundaries. There is no place for narrow nationalism in the gospel. Remember a few years ago, when we were starting the Cornhill course here in Scotland, somebody said, oh, I have to wear a kilt then. I'll have to be particularly Scottish. Which, of course, is why they chose two Englishmen and a guy who spent 14 years in England to run it? No, that's totally wrong. In Christ, there is no east and west. In him, no north and south. There is nothing nationalistic about the gospel.

It's not, and therefore, this is a nation without national boundaries. That's a national territory. And then, a people for his own possession. Now, that echoes the language of Isaiah 43.

Isaiah 43 is about another time of trial, and Peter is talking about a time of trial, when God's people are in exile in Babylon, and God says, don't be afraid. I chose you. I called you by my name. You are mine. Everything promised is delivered.

So, what are we if we become Christians? Chosen race, royal priest, holy nation, people of his own possession. Secondly, in the amazing privileges, what do we do then? If all that is true, and notice the rest of the verse, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

What do we do, in fact, what do we do? We proclaim the gospel, the life-changing gospel. And notice this gospel is not about education primarily. It's about transformation.

[8 : 41] Who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, the darkness of death, the darkness of sin, the darkness of despair into the light and life of the gospel.

When someone becomes a Christian, it's as if God is replaying the first act of creation. Let there be light. And there was light.

Like Paul says in 2 Corinthians, God who called the light out of darkness has caused the light of the glory of God, the face of Jesus Christ, to shine into your hearts.

And what do we proclaim the excellencies? Some translations say the wonderful deeds. It's both. It's who he is and what he does, particularly what he's done in Christ, the wonderful deeds.

That's what we're doing if we are Christians. And whatever else we do, we must do that.

[9 : 40] There was a group of students who were training for the ministry. And it came to the end of their time of training. They were addressed by a famous preacher who told them what the ministry is not about.

He says, it's not about balance sheets and money. It's not about, certainly not about committees. It's not about organizing. It's not about buildings.

Then he stops and says, what is it about? What is it you are going to do? What is it every Christian is going to do? He answered his own question. Tell them about Jesus. Tell them about the wonderful things he's done for you.

That's what it's about. That's what the Christian life is about. Declaring the excellencies, the wonderful deeds, him who called us out of darkness. Now, of course, we can fail in that. We can fail in two ways.

One, we can fail by not saying it at all, by keeping our mouth shut about this most wonderful news in the whole world. Or secondly, we can have a lot of prideful talk about ourselves, about our churches, about how good we are.

[10 : 54] In other words, we talk about our churches often as if they were the show house rather than the building site. Now, what's a building site? A building site is messy, it's dirty, it looks confused.

The church on earth is the building site. We're not yet the perfect, glorious church the book of Revelation talks about. It's about Christ. That's why I've called this series, Come to Him.

So, an amazing privilege, verses 9 and 10. And then a challenging, sorry, in verse 10, let me just make a brief comment on verse 10.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. This picks up from the Old Testament prophet Hosea. Once you didn't belong anywhere. Once you were ruthless, alienated to use contemporary word.

Once you had not received mercy. Not that there wasn't mercy. Just you hadn't received it. And now you have received mercy. There's a difference between now and then.

[11 : 58] What you were then and what you are now. Now, there's a challenging call then. Verses 11 and 12. That contingents into our final section, which we'll look at next week.

Beloved, he says, I urge you. Very strong word. Be what grace has made you. That's what he's saying.

Now, if you're not a Christian and you're considering being a Christian, what Peter is saying in this whole letter is, it's not a question of your faith and the strength of your faith.

It's a question of the faithfulness of God. It's not a question of how good you are. It's a question of what God will transform you into. And there are two sides of this.

First of all, he says, don't become so entangled with the present life that we forget the life to come. That's why he says sojourners and exiles.

[12 : 59] This isn't actually the homeland. We haven't reached it yet. We're on the journey. We're not there yet. So don't behave as if this were all that there is, as if this world were everything that is and there was nothing beyond it.

That goes back to verse 1 of the very beginning of the letter, to those who elect exiles of the dispersion, the diaspora, the people scattered around the Mediterranean.

They belong to a different country. If you're a Christian, you belong to a different country. Now that's not living in cloud cuckoo land.

That's not living in a way that we neglect this country. But in this country, we behave as citizens of another country. That's what's being said. Our standards, our values, our lifestyle, our guiding principles come from the world that is to come.

Abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. If you're a Christian, every morning when you wake up, all the passions of the flesh rush in, knocking at your door, clamoring for attention.

[14 : 14] Your hopes, your fears, all the things that must, all the things that want to turn us away from the world to come and fix us firmly into this world.

Peter's story says, they wage war against your soul, and of course we have to wage war against them. Not in our own strength, but in the strength of grace.

So there's the negative here. Don't live that way. And then the positive, verse 12, do live this way. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.

Now conduct here is the whole way of life. We've got lifestyle and more than lifestyle attitude. Live in a way that actually commends the gospel.

Now, so that when they speak against you, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Is that altogether clear what the day of visitation is?

[15 : 20] This probably ultimately refers to the last judgment, on the day when everything will be revealed, on the day when Christ returns, and when everything that is evil, everything that is unholy, will disappear in his, will disappear in the light of his presence.

As at the end of the last battle, all that is evil disappears into the dark shadow on Aslan's left-hand side. That may be. But there's also the idea of the anticipations of that day of visitation.

Because all throughout this life, we have anticipations of that day. A death, a bereavement, an illness, a disappointment. Basically, he's saying, when the Gentiles look at these things, look at the things that are happening to you.

And in Peter's case, this is persecution. Peter almost certainly writes this against the background of the persecution unleashed by Nero in the mid-60s of the first century, the persecution in which it's believed that he and Paul both were killed.

And hence he talks about the fiery trial. And he's saying, live in such a way that people will see that this is not your true homeland. And notice his language is very careful.

[16 : 41] They may see your good deeds. Is that the old-fashioned gospel of works, trying to smuggle in by the back door? Of course it's not. They may see your good deeds and say, what nice people you are.

They may see your good deeds and glorify God. That is the point. Genuine Christian conduct, genuine Christian good deeds always draw attention away from ourselves towards the Lord.

That is the point. It's not that we do good deeds to win the Lord's favor, still less to win the world's favor. It's that when we live in that way, the grace of God is at work.

And that anticipates the day of visitation as well, because the day of visitation, the phrase that's also used in elsewhere in the Old Testament, used about the Exodus, used in Luke, about the coming of Christ himself, the day of visitation as a time of grace, as well as of judgment, a time of blessing.

And therefore, they may see your good deeds and look at that God whom you serve, that Christ to whom you have come, as you come to him, the living stone.

[17 : 56] So what Peter is saying, as we finish, is Peter is saying, because you belong in this family, live as a member of the family.

You don't have to prove you're a member of the family, either to yourself or to others. One of the great weapons the devil uses always is guilt, to make people feel guilty, to make people feel inadequate.

Be who you are, says Peter. And secondly, be that way, so that the world may be attracted to Christ. Come to him, he says, and by coming to him, we will bring others into that kingdom as well.

Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, if we are members of your family, help us indeed to live as those who have been called out of darkness.

If we are still wondering whether we can be members of your family or whether we won't be able to keep it up, draw us by your grace.

[19 : 02] Draw us by your love so that we may see that it is the power of grace in us which transforms and the power of grace in us which will eventually bring us to glory.

We ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the living stone, the head of the church. Amen.