

The Promising Life in a World that is Perishing

Part 1: 2 Peter 1: 1-15

“Work out your Salvation by Ascending the Staircase of Faith”

Preached May 6 2007

The Passage

2 Peter 1:1-15

Greeting

1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

2 May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Make Your Calling and Election Sure

3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, **4** by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. **5** For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, **6** and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, **7** and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. **8** For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. **10** Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you

practice these qualities you will never fall. **11** For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

12 Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. **13** I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, **14** since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. **15** And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

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General Introduction:

This morning I am beginning a six week series on the 2nd Letter of Peter. This is one of the least known of the New Testament Letters and least frequently studied in the context of preaching. I think one of the reasons it is avoided is because of its clear theme of judgment. However, it is my hope that we will discover over these next six Sundays a word from God for today that is particularly pertinent. It is in a day like ours that this judgment theme needs to be heard with fresh ears.

In this letter Peter will go to great lengths to contrast those who are true teachers of the Gospel and those who are imposters. Within the storm that is currently raging within the Anglican Communion, this will be very helpful for us to understand. The crisis we are facing today is similar to the one Peter addresses in this letter.

Within the Church today there are those who are true teachers and those whose teaching is deceptive and false. That was also true in 62 AD. As followers of Jesus Christ we need to be able to distinguish between the two. And in this letter Peter will help to navigate us through these turbulent waters so that our ship can remain upright.

We will hear God speak to us in this letter a word of challenge and a word of encouragement.

We will be challenged to pursue the kind of Christian life that so deeply loves God and his word that we are actively growing in our knowledge

of Jesus Christ. We will also be challenged to examine how we are living in light of this relationship.

Secondly, we will be encouraged to affirm that because of our relationship to Jesus Christ we can know our true identity as those who are participants in the Divine Nature (1:5)

For us to appreciate the motivation Peter had for writing this letter we need to begin by looking at verse 14. "I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me."

John Calvin, one of the leading thinkers of the 16th Century Reformation said of this verse "The nearness of death makes the apostle diligent in the business of life." What a succinct way of illuminating the intention of this letter. In about 1500 words Peter will capture for us what it means to be diligent in the business of life. Or to put it in a way keeping the title of this sermon, Peter wants to show us how to live a "promising life in a world that is perishing."

There are three overarching themes Peter unpacks in these 1500 words. Each of these themes corresponds to the three chapters of this letter. As he says in verse 15, he wants them to be able to remember these themes after he has died. "And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things." We would do well to remember them too.

In chapter one he will exhort us to work out our own salvation.

In chapter 2 he will warn us to watch out for false teachers.

In chapter 3 he encourage us to wait for the Lord's coming.

Work, watch and wait are the words that form the superstructure of 2nd Peter. We will spend two weeks examining each of these chapters and the corresponding themes.

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As we turn our gaze now to chapter one Peter tells us that to work out our own salvation requires a particular kind of knowledge. Look at

verse 2: "May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." In order for us to work out our salvation knowledge of God the Father and of Jesus Christ is essential.

It is as we grow in our knowledge of God the Father and of Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit does a mathematical calculation in our lives.

Grace and peace are multiplied.

But we need to be clear that this multiplication does not just happen. It requires our co-operation. In this passage Peter will show us how we can co-operate with the Holy Spirit, so that as our faith matures we will know more fully the favour of God, which is his grace, and the presence of God, which is his peace.

"Knowledge" is a key word that helps to unlock the meaning of 2nd Peter. Not only is it used here in the opening of the letter, it reappears in the last verse chapter 3. "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

The word "knowledge" is like a bracket, inside of which everything else said in this letter will be framed. It is as we grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ that we can work out our salvation, watch for false teachers and wait for the Lord's coming.

In verse 3 Peter says something about the believer's character and something about God's character that then lead him to make his first conclusion in the letter, found in verse 4:

3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Do you see what he is getting at here? As we actively work out our salvation, not only do we enjoy the fruit of knowing God, which is his grace and peace, we are also granted power so that we are participants in his divine nature. While we do not become God, we do come to share in his divine character, what Peter refers to here as his glory and excellence.

The theology of this verse is stunning! As we grow in our knowledge of God, the Holy Spirit imparts a power in our lives so that we are granted all things needed to live a life of godliness in this world. But notice the environmental conditions in which this happens. It is in a world marked by corruption because of sinful desire (verse 4).

Isn't this remarkable? The knowledge of God releases a power in us so that rather than living according to sinful desires we desire to live according to God's precious and very great promises.

These precious and great promises are found in Holy Scripture, the theme we will delve into next week as we examine the second half of chapter 1. But for now let me say that our knowledge of God and his promises are to the Christian what armor all products do for a car. They help to protect us from moral and spiritual corrosion.

Knowledge of God, and faith in him, are the channel whereby all spiritual supports and comforts are conveyed to us. Knowing this sets up what Peter wants to say next:

"For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love".

We can call this Peter's staircase of faith. Each of the character traits listed builds on the previous one. But before we consider these traits we need to take a minute to consider the verb used here.

"To supplement" is the Greek verb *epichorego*. It has a colorful and fascinating history. In Greek drama the plays were put on by the combined effort of a poet (who wrote the script); the state (which provided the theater); and a wealthy individual called a *choregos*, who paid the expenses. This called for a generous but sometimes costly effort on his part. In Peter's view, God has written in the blood of Jesus the captivating script for a Christian life; the world is the theater wherein it will be played out; but the believer must cooperate by expending his or her diligent efforts to make the script come alive in vivid display. This exhortation begins a section, from 5-15, where Peter describes the responsibility which the believer's resources create.

The use of the phrase "make every effort" describes a determined zeal which is to be a daily and conscientious action on our part. It is an idea that Peter will reiterate in verse 10:

“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure”

So how is it that we are to be diligent in supplementing our knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ? This is where the staircase of faith comes into play.

Faith is the beginning point of this search for excellence. Everywhere in the New Testament it marks the beginning of the Christian life¹ Genuine faith results in God's impartation of eternal life to a spiritually dead individual².

Having received that life the believer is to cultivate the seven qualities that we are to walk up as we ascend this staircase. The first step is the quality termed **virtue**. This is the same word found in v. 3 as the character of Christ. What is translated in our version as “excellence.” It is plain that a Christian cannot produce this from himself or herself. He or she adds it only in the sense of choosing to act in such a way as to reflect the moral excellence of Jesus who dwells within them. He or she chooses goodness rather than corruption.

To this must be added **knowledge**. That is, practical wisdom, obtained by acting on the understanding which truth imparts.

Third in the list is **self-control**. This means mastering one's moods, rather than being controlled by them. The false teachers, whose views Peter is preparing to expose, believed that knowledge freed them from the need to control their passions. But Peter is showing that submission to Christ means evil moods can be rejected and Christian character exhibited instead.

The fourth quality, **steadfastness** or **perseverance**, naturally follows, for if one exercises self-control he or she will not easily succumb to discouragement or the despair that tempts one to quit. The habit of viewing all circumstances as coming from a loving Father's hand who is in control of all events is the secret of steadfastness.

¹ “And his name--by faith in his name--has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.” Acts 3:16; “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Romans 3:28.

² “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)

The fifth quality to be added is **godliness**. The pagans used this word to describe a religious individual who kept in close touch with the gods. But there is no sense of religiosity here but of a continual awareness of God's presence affecting and governing every aspect of life.

As Ray Stedman says: "It is never a burden to bear but a delight to enjoy, as it was with Jesus."

The sixth quality to be added is that of **brotherly affection**.

Philadelphia. The Greek word for this virtue is so closely linked with **godliness** that 1 John 4:20 says, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." As Jesus taught in the Gospel reading for this morning, love for the brethren involves serving one another; sharing with one another, practically and intimately; and praying for one another. It would be, He said, the mark of a true disciple. Such an attitude would immediately reject any display of prejudice, class or race distinction, or any form of exclusiveness or elitism in the Christian community.

Finally, the seventh quality to be manifested is **love (agape)**. This is God's kind of love in which the origin lies not in the one loved but in the one who loves. God loves because He **is** love; we are to love, because we are of God, participants in his divine nature.

Peter makes it clear to us that if we are responsible "**choregoses**" we will continue to grow in our knowledge of Jesus because his character is being increasingly shaped in how we live.

Do you see what has been going on in these verses? Peter says that we work out our salvation by knowing the character of God. As we grow in knowing his character, the Holy Spirit imparts power to us so that rather than our character reflecting the corruptible world it is reflecting our glorious God. This allows us to live a promising life in a world that is perishing.

As we live this way we are then encouraged to realize that even though there are great challenges we face as participants in the divine nature we will mature as disciples of Jesus Christ. Look at verse 8:

8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

Here Peter is first of all saying that if we conscientiously practice these virtues we will be fruitful in our knowledge of Jesus and live effectively as Christians in the world. However if these qualities are not being practiced in our lives it may be for one of two reasons. Blindness or forgetfulness.

The blindness is due to **shortsightedness** (*muopazos*, from which we get **myopia**). A myopic person is one who sees only that which is close at hand. Here it designates one who looks only at earthly and material values and does not see spiritual realities. Concerned only with this present life, he or she is blind to the things of God, and needs to return to the One who says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in darkness." Also he or she has **forgotten** the wonderful sense of cleansing that was theirs when they first turned to Christ. That cleansing needs to be renewed by confessing his or her present miserable condition and claiming again the cleansing grace of God. Temporary barrenness can be cured if prompt action is taken.

Peter knows how readily we can suffer from spiritual myopia and amnesia. The remedy for them is found in verse 10 where as we shore up our calling and election we will be inspired afresh to ascend the seven step staircase of faith.

"Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall."

Calling and election are two words, found frequently in the New Testament. They are listed here in the order of a believer's experience. In reality **election** comes first, consisting of God's sovereign choice of each believer to be in Christ, which choosing was done before the foundation of the world!³ God's call occurs in time, when He begins to draw the individual to Christ by various experiences and contacts⁴.

³ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (Ephesians 1.4)

⁴ 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6.44); 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace (Galatians 1:15)

Doubts of one's election often come from inconsistent behavior. When diligence is exercised to make the walk agree with the talk, assurance of salvation increases, stumbling is avoided, and God's elective call of the individual becomes visible to all.

As we get to verse 11 Peter gives us the reason why we are to actively work on out our salvation. 11 For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It is as we live a vital Christian life grounded in the knowledge of God, inspired by the Spirit to be empowered to live a life of faith, virtue, knowledge, self control, steadfastness, brotherly affection and love that we are being prepared to eventually enter the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the third theme of this letter, developed in chapter three under the heading of waiting for the Lord's return.

In writing this Peter has wanted to remind us of the character of God and the character that is to be reflected in the lives of those who are participants in the divine nature.

May I encourage you this week to set to memory the staircase of faith. For as we know these qualities and ask for the Holy Spirit to increase them within us that we will also grow in our knowledge of God the Father and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Be we 21st century Christians are those living in the first century we need to do this. Because the Bible says that this is the way for us to live a promising life in a world that is perishing. That this is God's will for us Peter affirms when in verses 12 and 13 he writes:

12 Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder.

I pray that we too have been stirred up to renew ourselves to live lives of Godly character as we are reminded what it means to work out our salvation as those who know the author of our salvation, Jesus Christ the Lord.

By so doing we can live a "promising life in a world that is perishing."

