

Prayer

Jesus Christ, You lived a life of love. You knew what it was to laugh, to cry to mourn, to jump with glee, to live life to the full. Teach me to live life to the full, and where I have lost something of my humanity through the wear and tear of the years, inspire me to rediscover, by faith, the joy of truly living. I ask this of You, Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the sick in mind

Pray for parents of children who are born with little prospect of normal mental development. Pray that there will be proper support networks to help families with such needs.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those worst affected by rising food prices and poverty*
- *Pray for recent converts to Christ*
- *Pray for the armed forces of your country and the work they do*

Meditation

(a blessing)

May Jesus Christ, who sacrificed His life for all,
Bless, preserve and keep you from the Evil One.

May the Lord deliver you from the tyranny of the world,
And from all sins which foster anger and greed.

May the God who made everything, make you new again,
Remaking your mind and spirit in the image of love.

May the Spirit of God, who is ever active around you,
Inform and direct you towards everything that is good.

Now to Him who is your strength, your joy and your salvation,
Be all glory, all honour, all power and majesty. forever.

AMEN

Bible Study - 1 Peter 2:9-12

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you might declare the supreme work of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

¹¹ *Dear friends, who live in the world as strangers and exiles, I urge you to keep yourselves free from worldly passions, which battle against your soul.* ¹² *Live such good lives among the Gentiles, so that even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and give glory to God on the day of visitation.*

Review

This fascinating passage has two sections, the first half (2:9.10) contains Peter's classic description of the Church of God. It is often quoted, sometimes misunderstood, and rich in

meaning; using words which are familiar to us from the Old Testament and including a quote from Hosea. The second half (2:11,12) is Peter's summary advice to keep free of worldly pleasures and do good; and although there is such advice in nearly all of the New Testament letters written by Paul, James and John, this is memorably succinct. We recall that Peter's letter may well have been a part of a sermon addressed to new converts who had just received baptism.

This whole passage is addressed to all God's people, and every 'you' and 'your' within it is plural, meaning that it refers to God's people the Church, not simply to you or me as individuals. The whole text celebrates the holy calling of God's people who are 'chosen' by Him for a special priestly task in the world as God's own nation. It gives thanks for the deliverance (2:9) and mercy of God (2:10) by which people are saved and called out of the world of 'darkness' into the 'light' of God's presence, and it also warns all those who have been so called to abstain from evil (2:11) and live lives of goodness which witness to God (2:12). Clearly, all these benefits and blessings are for the Lord's people to enjoy together, not alone! They may be true for us as individuals, but they make so much more sense when we can rejoice in them together!

What Peter says is dominated by a phrase in verse 11; 'dear friends, who live in the world as strangers and exiles ...' (2:11). With these words, Peter calls to mind the forefathers and their families; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his extended family, who all lived as nomads in Canaan, and Moses who lived like a nomad in the wilderness for forty years as he led the People of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Their lives were lived on the move, in anticipation of the day when their ancestors would inherit Canaan, as the 'Promised Land'; God had promised them that they would receive this land as an inheritance so they had to live in faith that God's promises were true. Peter used this picture to inspire God's people in the early church to live a godly life even though the world around them seemed a godless place. Just like the forefathers, the promise of the future and the call of God should enable the Church to fulfil its witness to the Gospel.

So Peter concludes by calling all Christians to submit everything to Christ, and live 'good lives among the Gentiles', according to the promise and call of God. This, he says, will have consequences (2:12), because these 'good deeds' will make others take notice of the Gospel, even if they only acknowledge its truth on the 'day of visitation' (one of Peter's distinct ways of talking about the End Times when Christ will come again).

In most versions of the Bible 2:9,10 are added to the end of the previous section of Peter's letter (2:4-8), and 2:11,12 are placed together with what follows (2:13-18), as if we should see Peter's heavenly vision of God's church as one thing, and the practical way that it works as another. By presenting the reading in this way, I hope to show that Peter's intention was to make a very firm connection between the two. What we believe about God's heavenly call should affect our lives now. God's people are called not simply to have a good life for themselves, but to be a part of God's holy People, with a single, common call to spread the Gospel and extend the Kingdom of God.

Going Deeper

There are many words in this text which have great meaning, particularly in verse 9, and all of these deserve our attention. So we will look now at some of the words in the two halves of this text to see how they help build up our vision both of God's calling of His people, and also of His summons to do good deeds!

Notes on the text and translation

V9 *The phrase 'royal priesthood' (Greek 'basileion hierateuma'), translates equally well as a 'kingdom of priests'. See text for a discussion of the significance of this.*

- V9 *Where I have translated the passage 'the supreme work', you will find that most translations are different. The original Greek word 'aretas', has its origins in the idea of 'moral excellence', but as applied to God here, it means His great work in redemption and salvation, no less. It is tempting to use 'the Gospel' as a translation, but because the Greek for Gospel is not used, I have avoided it. The expression 'the supreme work' encompasses all God's redeeming work.*
- V10 *This verse is a reworked quote from Hosea 2:23 (also 1:6,9, 2:1). Some translations use quotation marks, but I have not done this as it is not an exact quote, and all we are asked to see is the clear general connection with the story of Hosea.*
- V11 *Peter uses two words, 'paraoikos' meaning 'alien or stranger' and 'paradidemos' meaning 'temporary resident or refugee'. However, in the first verse of Peter, he used this second word more technically to mean 'exile'. Or one who is forcibly living away from the homeland. For Peter, this is a description of life for the Christian whose home is heaven.*
- V11 *The phrase 'worldly passions' translates two Greek words 'sarkikon epithumion', and the second word is a general word referring to worldly lusts, longings, passions or even covetousness. It has a very wide range of meaning.*
- V12 *The last three words; 'day of visitation' are not found in the New Testament very often. The Greek word for 'visitation' is 'episcopos' which is also used of the office of a bishop (see 1 Tim 3:1). However, it carries the meaning of God's presence amongst His people. This, of course, is partially true now, but in this passage, it does appear to refer to the day when God 'visits' again, i.e. the second coming.*

A chosen, holy people. (2:9)

It is perhaps natural that Peter should present the converts he was addressing with a high ideal of the church. They had not made a casual commitment to a self interest society, but a life-changing pledge to God to be His people and to do His will, and it is not surprising that Peter used key words from the Old Testament to describe their calling. They were God's new people who replaced those who had stumbled (see 2:4-8), but the nature of their calling was the same as for those who had gone before.

The first phrase is 'you are a chosen people'. Peter had already used the word 'chosen' in his letter before; in 1:2 and 2:4. In the first of these (1:2), Peter emphasised that God always chose people for a purpose, essentially to be witnesses to Jesus Christ within the world. The people of Old Testament times had been called to be witnesses to God and be a blessing for the whole world, but they had failed in their task. Now that the Messiah had come, the new 'chosen people' were to be witnesses to Jesus because it was through Him that people would come to know God. In 2:4 it is Jesus Himself who is called 'chosen' for this very reason, and the word 'chosen' serves to remind all God's people that they are bound to Christ. Christ is chosen by God to bring salvation to the world, and now he has ascended, the church is chosen by God to continue and fulfil this task.

The work of God's people is described by the wonderful expression 'a royal priesthood'. Priesthood is a word which can conjure up a picture of individual church leaders, but there is no doubt that by addressing a group of converts after baptism in this way, Peter clearly regarded all of God's people as priests! Yesterday, we learned that priesthood means both representing God to people and people to God; and today Peter emphasises in this text that all God's people are called to this task, the church represents God to the world and the world to God. If we take the translation 'royal priesthood' (see notes above) then this must be by the royal command of God, the King. The alternative translation 'kingdom of priests' simply confirms that all God's people take part in this priesthood without exception. Perhaps we need to read this both as a 'royal priesthood' and a 'kingdom of priests'!

The last designation in verse 9 is this, the church is a 'holy nation'. The word 'holy' is full of meaning, but at its heart, it means 'set apart' for the purpose God has intended. People naturally think of the word 'holy' as meaning 'pure' because God is pure and holy, but it is important to understand this sense of being special and set apart for a specific task. God has called all of His people to be one nation with one purpose, and although in reality we may fail, this does not stop God continually calling His people. No-one in church becomes holy by 'doing things properly in worship', for example, or getting everything right. We are made holy in the fulfilment of our call to be witnesses of Christ and the Gospel to the world.

Transformation (2:10)

All the titles of God's people which previously applied to the Jewish people have now been transferred to the Church, and Peter now quotes the famous prophecy of Hosea 2:23; 'I will say to "Not my people", "You are my people", and He shall say "You are my God"', but because this text is rather hard to understand, he part interprets it by using other parts of the prophecy of Hosea (1:6,9; 2:1) in order to make the meaning plain. Hosea's devastating prophecy told the people of Israel (of the northern Kingdom) that because of their sins they had counted themselves out of God's covenant blessings; however, Hosea knew that because of His faithfulness, God would find a way of redeeming this catastrophe and creating a new people who would return to the Lord and keep His covenant. He never lived to see this day himself, but Peter was happy to declare that this prophecy had now come true through 'Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light' (2:9). Yet again, Peter was using the Old Testament to make his basic point that the Church was now the 'People of God', and therefore the recipient of God's mercy.

A people who are prepared to do what is right (2:11,12)

The idea of living in this world as 'strangers' is one which is hard for most people today to grasp (2:11). Most of us are fully committed to living and raising families where we find ourselves and in the culture in which we are born, and we naturally find it easy to spiritualise verses such as these by saying that we live half in this world and half in heaven by means of our heavenly citizenship. This world is for now, we reckon, and heaven is for what comes next, and the two come together spiritually in our faith.

However, this is not what this passage says. By worldly passions, Peter does not mean evil desires, otherwise he would say so. The word he uses refers to the normal passions and longings which govern the lives we naturally create for ourselves and our families, whether culturally, financially, or socially. Most people have a natural tendency to try and find permanence and security, and create a 'home' which reflects ourselves. But by using the example of the nomadic forefathers, Peter encourages Christians to think of their life as fundamentally transient, not permanent. He does not identify this or that as wrong but rather, he suggests making sure that the heart is set on heaven and not on earthly things, just as Jesus did in His own teaching (see Matt 6:25-34 for example).

This is the source of the goodness which Peter suggests will win over the Gentiles, and the reason is simple. If we are motivated in our actions by the same selfish desires as everyone else, then we will not stand out and therefore have no message. If our actions in this world come from different motives because we do not worry about the things of this world and know we can trust in God, then what we do will appear very different to other people, and if we are following our Lord, then we will show Christ to others through what we do. People (Gentiles – 2:12) may not like this, but when Christ comes, they will have to admit that we were doing what was right!

Application

It is hard for us to try and picture how we should live in the light of the blessing of being God's people, but Peter's call to live 'as strangers and exiles' is powerful. The true call for every Christian is to be ready at Christ's command, willing to follow Him wherever and at

whatever cost. In this sense our lives are indeed transient, and we never have a complete home here on earth, knowing that the only complete home we ever have will be in heaven with the Lord.

This whole idea is frightening to many people within the church. However, it is my experience that it is most frightening to people who have found security in this world, and part of that security is going to church on Sunday's and having a group of people to trust and love. The only trouble is that this is not the life of Christ that God has called us to, and those who are comfortable with their lives will find it hard to be a 'chosen nation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation', simply because when God asks about doing certain things, the answer will be no if it cuts across earthly or personal security.

I write about this out of concern, because within settled churches, self-centred faith is one of the big reasons why churches fail to grow or die. The whole of scripture asks God's people to be a people on the move and aware of their transient life. Sometimes God will give us stability, perhaps for the sake of our children and their upbringing in a troubled world, for example. But the call to us all is to be available to Him for the work of the Kingdom. All those who have found the truth of this call of God will testify that the security we have in Christ means far more than any security this world can offer, but unfortunately, many people who call themselves Christians today do not know this blessing; and it is the true blessing of being the 'People of God'.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which part of this great passage appeals to you most, and helps you feel part of the worldwide church of God?
2. Do you agree with me that this passage exposes ideals that our churches today would be unwilling to put into practice?
3. Have you ever known anyone observe the good works of the church and be attracted to it as a consequence? How can you make your church fellowship be attractive?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Personally, I find the first half of this passage wonderfully exhilarating, because it reminds me of the great call of God to His people to be a holy people. Unfortunately, the second half reminds me not just of the duties of being a Christian, with which I have no difficulty, but also the fact that many people who go to church simply do not follow this pathway and would not want to. I do not understand such Christianity.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Take a week to think about this passage of scripture, dwelling on it and exploring what it means for you. Go out and walk by yourself and think through what it means to live knowing that this life is passing and not permanent.*
- *Discuss this passage with your spouse or with a close friend, and find out whether they understand this passage in the same as you do*

Final Prayer

Creator God, I do not understand why the world has become so full of the sin and evil I see around me. Give me the courage to face up to reality and confront evil wherever I find it, in Jesus' name; for Jesus has won the victory over all evil, and in Him I have total confidence. Thank You, Lord, AMEN