

Prayers

To God

Praise You Lord Jesus Christ, for the incredible journey of faith upon which You have led Your people the Church, over two thousand years. May we who bear the Good News of Salvation in this generation confess our debt to those who have gone before, and prove worthy of our call to preach the Word to all people both in season and out of season: AMEN

For myself

Weekly theme: doing the work of the Gospel

Pray for those who are employed in your church for the role of evangelism or for outreach. Pray they will be able to show people the love and kindness that will draw them to the Cross.

For others

Pray for people involved in the world of sports, especially those who gain great fame for a short period of time. Pray for their souls and for their salvation.

Meditation

When I feel like letting go, Lord Jesus, hold me close;
and when I want to run away, then stay with me, dear Lord.

When I know that I am lost, Lord Jesus, rescue me;
and when I lose direction, then be my compass, dear Lord.

When I see there's trouble ahead, Lord Jesus, clear my mind;
and when I feel the threat of fear, then soothe my soul, dear Lord.

When I hear the call to action, Lord Jesus, make me ready;
and when I stumble on the way, then lift my spirit, dear Lord.

When I sense the time is right, Lord Jesus, lead me onwards;
and when I open my lips to speak, then fill my mouth dear Lord.

When I'm sure I'm on the right track, Lord Jesus, keep me whole;
and when I grasp the call of God, then fill my life, dear Lord.

Bible Passage

1 Peter 1:22-25

²² Now you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth for the sake of genuine mutual love, earnestly love one another from a pure heart; ²³ you who have been born again, not of mortal but immortal descent, through the living and abiding Word of God. ²⁴ This is because:

'All humanity is like grass, and its entire glory is like the flower of grass; the grass withers and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the Word of the Lord abides forever.'

And this Word is the Gospel which was preached to you.

Review

It is so easy to read this wonderful text and appreciate its power, and yet miss the full meaning of what is said. There is no doubt that this passage contains important advice for Christians, to be obedient to the Gospel and loving one another (1:22), accepting the amazing truth of new birth into the things of God (1:23), being touched by the 'abiding' Word of God (1:23), to compare what God has given us with the temporary and fading glories of this world (1:24) and dwelling on the truth of the Gospel (1:25). All of this is worth our fullest attention and study; but if we do no more we will miss out on a great deal. For as we study we will find out that there is a reason why Peter wrote these words.

The clue to this comes at the beginning of each of verse 22 and 23, which I paraphrase in this way; *'now you have purified your souls ...you who have been born again ...'*. This gives us the impression that Peter was speaking in an impassioned manner directly to a group of people, and the language is that of a baptismal service! Once you spot this it is easy to see how the whole passage jumps into life!

Earlier in our studies we noticed that the passage 1 Peter 1:3 to 4:11 was like a sermon, but we can now gain a fuller picture. Peter begins with what seems to be advice for candidates for baptism designed to give them encouragement (1:3-9), and then starting the Christian life (1:10-12). He then appeals to them to separate themselves from the world (1:13-16), invoking the name of God and the saving work of Jesus (1:17-21). Many reckon, as I do, that at this point in the sermon (between verses 21 and 22) the candidates were duly baptised! Then the first words they hear as they come up from the water are these words of blessing and encouragement (1:22-25)! You can almost feel the joy of the baptised as they take hold of faith (1:22,23) and let go of the old life (1:24)!

If we now look again at the passage, it says more. The candidates have been prepared, and been '*purified*' (1:22), and they have been obedient to God having heard the Gospel (Acts 2:38f.). For Peter, this means much more, because each baptised person would have to commit to Jesus' teaching, supremely, to '*love one another*' (1:22). Peter does not think of baptism as a mere initiation rite, but as demonstrating what Jesus Himself called '*new birth*' (1:23) and the change by which a Christian leaps from living by worldly standards to the higher call to live by the '*abiding Word of God*' (1:23). He then illustrates the difference between the new and the old by reminding the baptismal candidates of where they have come from, quoting a famous prophecy, '*all humanity is like grass ...*' Isaiah (40:6-8); but they have been changed! So this is baptism, and this is the Gospel!

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V22 There are two Greek words for love used in this verse. Firstly 'philadelphia' which I have translated 'mutual love' because it refers to natural affection between brothers and sisters. Secondly the word 'agape' which I have translated 'love' as in 'love one another ...'. This is the stronger category of love which carries with it a sense of faithfulness and intent which is unique to the New Testament. See study for further details.

V23 **'descent'**

Other translations:

'seed' (CEB, NIV)

'imperishable seed' (NRSV)

The word 'descent' (Greek 'spora') is sometimes translated 'seed'. It refers to a person's lineage, using the ancient imagery of male 'sperm' or 'seed' by which a child is conceived. We often miss out on the full meaning of this because of modern sensibilities about sex and male descent, but if we allow ourselves to accept the full meaning of this word used frequently and unashamedly in scriptures, then it enriches our understanding of both baptism and our being 'sons of God'.

V23 **'abiding'**

Other translations:

'enduring' (CEB, NRSV)

'living and abiding' (ESV)

The word 'abide' (Greek verb 'meno') combines the idea of permanence, dwelling and endurance. There is no other word in English which captures this combination, so although it is a relatively old word, it is unwise not to use it because the alternatives are inadequate.

V24 This is a famous text which many people know well, but not entirely accurately. The truth is that the Greek does not say 'the flower of the field', it says 'the flower of grass', meaning quite literally the grass flower which releases pollen (like any flower). Consequently, the words 'the grass withers and the flower falls' describe the natural process of the dying off of grass in the autumn of a hot country such as Israel.

V25 **'the Gospel which was preached to you'**

Other translations:

'the Word that was preached to you' (NIV)

'the Good news that was announced to you' (NRSV)

The whole phrase, 'Gospel which was preached to you' is one word in Greek; 'euangelidzo'. Quite literally, it means 'the declaring of thanks', but in the New Testament it retains in general a specialist meaning, referring almost always to the preaching of the Gospel.

Further Comments

Obedience, faith and love (1:22)

The phrase which greets us at the beginning of this passage is this; 'now you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth ...' No sentence could better describe the state of one who has just been baptised! The Greek verb 'now you have purified' means that a deed has been done which has continuing effects, and the word 'soul' means 'a whole person' not just some part or aspect of a person's identity. All this fits well with what we know about baptism from the New Testament. It is not something which has power in itself, and we are certainly not saved because we are baptised, but neither is it a mere symbol of our salvation for there are many symbols of faith which can remind us of what Christ has done for us (including the Communion, or the 'Lord's Supper' for example). However, once we have submitted in obedience and faith to baptism, life can never be the same again. Baptism is by its nature a public statement made by an individual which is blessed by God and therefore changes the purpose and direction of that person's life. God of course has saved us in Christ before we even knew it, but in baptism we make our public statement of faith, declaring that we believe the Gospel we have heard to be the truth.

Truth is a difficult word to use today, because many people regard it as a philosophical concept or an intellectual entity. Here in Peter's letter, it simply stands for the truth of the Gospel, which, because it comes from God the Creator of the World, must by definition be true in every sense of the word. This, of course, is still the same today, but people find it hard to think of truth like this because they are locked in to the world's way of thinking.

The immediate consequence of baptism is that we are led into a new quality of love, and this is the love of Jesus Christ, expressed by the New Testament word 'agape' and found in the phrase 'love one another'. This quality of love is marked by the two main characteristics of the love of God found in the Old Testament; faithful love (God's 'Covenant' love) which never fails and always persists, and the undeserved love of God expressed in His blessing and favour, often described in the New Testament as 'grace'. So one who is baptised is empowered by God to live up to a higher and more demanding quality of love for others which is not merely 'genuine mutual love', however noble and righteous this may be from a human point of view, but love which is infused with the eternal characteristics of God, which are faithfulness and grace. This is the 'agape' Jesus calls us to when He says 'love one another' (John 13:34f. 15:2f.) and what Paul means when he speaks of love (Romans 12:10, 2 Cor 13:10 etc.). Here, Peter reminds us that it is not a form of love we can express except by the presence of God within us by 'new birth' and through baptism, the route God has ordained by which we attain it.

Born again, immortal! (1:23,24)

It is hardly surprising that Peter refers again to the famous conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus when talking to those who have just been baptised. Many a preacher at a baptism service has preached from John 3:3 or John 3:16. Peter has already spoken about the 'new birth' of one who receives Christ (1:3), and it is clear that the Gospel he preached centred on the new birth we have in Christ Jesus. In our passage, he explains it in a way which is very similar to Jesus' explanation in John 3, saying that the new birth is not a new physical birth but a spiritual, or 'immortal' one. The idea is not that physical birth is somehow downplayed or cast aside so that we can have another birth into the things of God, but that once born physically, we all need a spiritual 'new birth' into the immortal things of God.

As I explained in the notes above for verse 23, the word often used in this passage and elsewhere in scripture is 'seed', meaning inheritance or descent. However, Peter's words contain the strong suggestion that just as Jesus was conceived spiritually in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, so our 'new birth' as spiritual beings is in the same immortal lineage

of Jesus, by means of the Holy Spirit, of God Himself. Jesus' work of salvation has made this new birth possible; as Peter says, it happens 'through the living and abiding Word of God' (1:23)

Peter uses a quote from Isaiah 40:6-8 in order to make his point, and I have described some of the details of the illustration in the notes above. Isaiah saw the truth that all history and human experience is 'like the flower of grass'. In different parts of the world our mental picture of grass is different because of the climate in which we live. In the Middle East, grass grows and flowers in the summer just as it does anywhere in the world, but its life-span is short because of the hot winds which dry it up and release and spread its pollen and seed. Certainly, grass continues to grow, year on year, but it was only green and growing for a short period. By comparison, the 'Word of the Lord' was everlasting

The 'Word of the Lord' (1:24,25)

When Peter said 'the Word of the Lord abides for ever' (1:23), it was the second time he used the Greek word 'meno' in this passage (see also 1:23), and each time he used it to describe God's Word. What does Peter mean by the 'Word of the Lord'? It is unlikely that Peter meant the Bible, meaning the Old Testament of his own day (because the New Testament had not yet been formed and compiled). Given that so many links have been made with the Gospel of John, and the fact that Peter and John were very close when following Jesus, it is most likely that Peter used this expression to refer to Jesus in His exalted form. The risen Jesus was the 'Word of God', living and permanently dwelling amongst those who receive Him.

You could say that the metaphors have become all mixed up at this point, but that is how it should be, and Peter shows no concern at the overlapping layers of illustration he gives. He was preaching a sermon of inspiration to converts, and one which the Holy Spirit would use both in them and now in us, to inspire our faith and our spirits. Jesus is the immortal Word of God, people are like mortal 'grass', but when people accept Jesus then the immortal replaces the mortal in them, and the 'Word of God' becomes life within which is never ending and enables God's people to love each other with the highest qualities of love. However you express this, it is the same Gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ and by means of the Holy Spirit

Discipleship

Application

The meaning of baptism

I am one who was baptised as an infant, but who consciously confirmed my baptismal promises as an adult, and both events, though I can only remember the second, are deeply meaningful to me. It is very important that the church maintains its commitment to baptism as the way God has ordained for us to express our faith publicly. Despite the many divisions within the church, it is still true that most churches accept the baptism practiced by others, and if they do not, then they ought to, because just as there is one God, there is One Lord Jesus Christ and One Baptism into His death and resurrection which affirms our faith.

I ask you please to protect and honour the practice of baptism within your church because as you read scripture you will find that it frequently talks about the spiritual issues of life and death which lie at the heart of baptism; whether washing away the impurities of the old life, coming through death to life, being 'born again' to the immortality of the soul, all of these Gospel truths are expressed within baptism. Frankly, the same applies to those who are

baptised as adults, or those who confirm their baptism through adult confirmation, and the less we fight over the meaning of this, the more our Lord Jesus is glorified. I firmly believe His heart aches over our divisions on this matter and the intransigence with which many Christians treat others on this issue.

The power of baptism

Our scripture today has energy, vitality, enthusiasm and godly power to inspire, direct, instruct and motivate those who are baptised to celebrate their faith with vigour and optimism. What can possibly overcome us if we have been saved by Christ and live with the assurance of immortality? Death has lost its power, and life may be lived for the glory of God.

Ideas for what to do

- Read through the quote in verse 24 and 25 from Isaiah. Learn this and recall it from time to time during your day or during the week ahead. You will find that this verse will speak to you more and more as you use it.
- Try to find out what your church's policy is on baptism. Measure it against what is said here in this text and what other great passages of scripture say about baptism (e.g. Romans 6) say.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does this passage of scripture help you understand your own baptism? If so, how?
2. What is truth? In the light of this study, see if you can answer this famous question posed by Pilate (John 18:38)
3. Discuss what you mean by the phrase the 'Word of God', and what does this phrase say about Jesus?

Final Prayer

When our time comes to stand up and do Your will, may we not be found wanting. Give us courage, Lord God, when we hear Your voice, to act; and when we sense Your call, to follow. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN