

Characteristics of Believers

1 Peter 2: 1-16

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May-Oct 1965

In this chapter we have a detailed description of the saints of God. The apostle Peter, led by the Holy Spirit to write to believers who had been recently converted, outlines many of the privileges which were theirs. He uses certain appellatives to describe the magnitude of the blessings into which they had been brought through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. There are some thirteen appellatives in this section of his epistle, and all are true of every saint of God. A name describes who a person is; a title relates to some office that person may fill, whereas an appellative describes some distinctive characteristic of the person.

The first of these is found in verse 2 — "New born babes." It is obvious that this description flows out from what the apostle had already brought before them in the previous chapter. He had assured them that they had been "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." They had not attained to this place of blessing by any outstanding law keeping, or diligent attention to the feasts and ceremonies of Judaism, but through an entirely new work in their souls which was the result of the sovereign power of God. It was not an attainment brought about by human perfection, but a new and divine work in their souls by the energy of the Holy Spirit of God. It was this work which had brought them into the realm of Christianity — a realm entirely apart from Judaism. This work had been effected in them by the Holy Spirit through the testimony to the work of Christ as preached to them in the gospel. It was a completely new beginning in a new spiritual realm, and hence the apostle addresses them "as new born babes."

As this spiritual work had been brought about by the use of the word of God in the power of the Spirit, it follows that this new spiritual nature could be fed only by that self-same word, Peter therefore exhorts them to "desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby," (v. 2).

In verse 5 the apostle refers to them as "living stones" (the better translation of the word "lively" is "living"). As such they formed part of the "spiritual house" of which Christ Himself is the "chief corner stone," (v. 6). "Living stones" describes the saints as having both the nature and the life of Christ, and so formed to have their place in this new "spiritual house." Thus this third appellation "a spiritual house" describes them as "builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit," (Eph. 2: 22).

Verse 5 also speaks of "an holy priesthood." In both the tabernacle and the temple the house is first described and then the priesthood. The building first, then a company sanctified to draw near to God in His house, whether the tabernacle or the temple. Peter in his writings is occupied with the temple as a type of the "spiritual house" and of the "holy priesthood." It is worthy of note that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews (presumably the apostle Paul) always refers to the *tabernacle* as the type of the house, whereas Peter refers to the *temple* in the same connection. *Approach* appears to be the outstanding privilege connected with the tabernacle, and *display* that of the temple. Such is the thought we have in our chapter, for whilst the saints are said "to offer up spiritual sacrifices" it was in testimony to Christ that they did so. Of old, the house being material, was distinct from the company of priests who had the privilege of ministering to God for His pleasure, but today the saints who are attached to Christ compose both the house and the priesthood. Christianity is thus a wholly spiritual conception.

1 Peter 2: 6, 9

"*He that believeth*". In reminding the saints that they had believed the testimony rendered in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter proceeds to shew them that while the nation had accounted Him to be worthless, God had placed Him at the highest pinnacle of glory. As having believed on Him, they would never be confounded, a word which means "ashamed." they would never regret having accepted Jesus Christ as the true Messiah as far as Israel is concerned, but now the "Head of the corner" in the new spiritual house into which they had been brought. As the "chief corner stone" Christ holds the whole building together. So the obedience of faith had brought them into this exalted position where all the preciousness of Christ is found. They took character from the "corner stone" with all His preciousness resting upon them.

"*A chosen generation*". This next description of them indicates "a chosen race." They were formed into an entirely new company bearing the features of Christ. What an honour! What a privilege to be able to reproduce the features of Christ and thus manifest that they were of a new spiritual race. Israel under law had completely failed to produce features that were pleasing to God, but now there was this new generation manifesting the features of Christ and thus walking under the eye of God for His pleasure. Only by the Holy Spirit could this be brought about, and only by believing could they receive the Spirit. But they *had* believed, and they *had* the Spirit, and the characteristics of Christ were manifested, shewing in truth that they were "a chosen race," v. 9.

"*A royal priesthood*". Priests were those who were devoted to the service of God. Royal, or kingly priests, would shew the dignity of their calling. Holding themselves at all times for the service of God, ever having in mind that what they did as serving Him ascended to Him as a priestly offering.

"*An holy nation*". If this new race was to function as a priestly company, it could only be as in sanctified conditions. This is the bearing of the word "holy" — sanctified, or set apart. No doubt it involved being set apart from what is sinful, and from Judaism in which none of these spiritual features were found. The christian company was set apart from all that would keep man from God and hinder its service to Him in the liberty of the Holy Spirit. This sanctified state is twofold in character — *from* what is contrary to God, and *to* what is pleasurable to Him. It involves being kept in the liberty into which Christ has brought His own, and into the enjoyment of the spiritual blessings which are experienced in the new Christian circle apart from all that would hinder enjoyment of this new privilege. Thus, Israel, as a nation who served God, has been supplanted, (v. 9).

"*A peculiar people*," or it might read — "a people for a possession." Not only were they in the present enjoyment of the blessings which were theirs as belonging to Christ, but they were a people whom God owned as His. He had formed a company for Himself, a company who manifested the features of Christ; who served Him as priests, and held themselves first of all as His people, ready to do His pleasure. As such a people they were privileged to "shew forth the praises of Him who" had "called them out of darkness into His marvellous light," (v. 9). Virtues, or excellencies, is the meaning of this word "praises." Judaism had been characterized by darkness, God in His love unknown; but now they were in the full light of the revelation of God as made known through His well-beloved Son. As a kingly priesthood they were displaying to men the excellencies of God. In this way God was finding His pleasure in them as His own possession in this world.

How well for us to keep these simple thoughts in mind! Whatever we may do before men, as shewing forth the excellencies of God, ever ascends to Him as an acceptable offering. In this priestly service every believer, as set apart by God for His own pleasure, may have part.

1 Peter 2: 10

If we keep in mind that the apostle Peter was writing to those who were previously Jews, we shall understand why he constantly refers to the Old Testament scriptures which largely have the nation of Israel in view. He would thus assure the saints to whom he writes that what the *nation* as such will yet attain in the world-to-come, *they themselves* had already obtained in a higher and more blessed way as marked by faith in Jesus Christ, He whom the nation had rejected.

The description of them as "the people of God" is quoted from Hosea 2: 23. The first time we read of God calling Israel "My people" was when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3: 7). Following this the first demand to Pharaoh (Exodus 5: 1) was "Let My people go." Such was the beginning of the history of Israel as thus known, but how sadly we subsequently read in Hosea 1: 9, "Call his name Lo-ammi; for ye are *not* My people, and I will *not* be your God." The whole of the first two chapters of Hosea are occupied with the downward course of the nation as they sank into idolatrous worship, thus no longer bearing the features of the people of God. Yet, towards the end of chapter 2 the prophet speaks of the time when, in the world-to-come, they will again be publicly owned as the "people of God." This will be, however, on the ground of the sovereign mercy of God, when as cleansed from idols and their worship, they will again worship the true God.

The apostle is led of the Holy Spirit to assure these believers that they already stood in this relationship with God as His people, those in whom He could now find delight, and from them obtain a response in thanksgiving and praise to the grace and mercy He had shown towards them. Two things were now true of them as the "people of God" — they stood in divine favour as in relationship with God, and they were capacitated to respond to Him in grateful praise for the delight of His own heart of love.

"Strangers" (verse 11) is the next appellative used by the apostle and would remind them that they had been called with a *heavenly* calling. A stranger is one who does not belong to the place in which he may be sojourning. Peter had already reminded these saints they were strangers in the districts in which they were forced to live — Pontus, Galatia, etc. — but the thought of strangers in this verse is something much deeper than that. As in Roman provinces they may have adopted the manners and customs of those places, and have become characterized by the features of the people amongst whom they dwelt. Hence this exhortation to bear the character of strangers, and thus abstain from fleshly lusts which would war against their souls. This would involve their keeping apart from all those things in which the ungodly found their lives and pleasure. As strangers they were to manifest by their manner of life that their hearts had been set on brighter things above! Thus their conduct would support their testimony to Christ as risen.

"Pilgrims" (verse 11). As such they looked on to the end of the pathway along which they were moving, knowing they had a place in heaven into which they would be received at the coming of their Lord. "Strangers" would connect with that which is *around*; "Pilgrims" with that which is *before*. A stranger is one who manifests that he does not belong to the place in which he may be, whilst a pilgrim shows that he is journeying onwards to that which is before him, having no desire to settle down until that place is reached. Israel were strangers in Egypt; pilgrims in the wilderness. Such then are the terms used by the apostle to encourage these believers to be found apart from the world around, and to press on to the goal which was before them. How good it is for *us* to be reminded constantly of these things, lest we forget the glory which lies ahead, and settle down in this present world.

"Servants of God" (verse 16). This appears to be the last of the appellatives used by the apostle in this chapter, and it would involve all that has preceded it. The word translated "servants" is really "bondmen," and would speak of those wholly devoted to the will of God. How instructive for us to

notice the connections in which this description is found, and the injunctions which surround it. "Submit yourselves . . . to the king . . . unto governors" (verses 13, 14). "Honour all"; "Love the brotherhood"; "Fear God"; "Honour the king" (verse 17). "Servants be subject to your masters" (verse 18). It is evident that wherever we are, and in whatever sphere we may be found, we should be marked by conduct consistent with our position as "servants of God." Should this at times involve suffering, God will take account of it as "thankworthy."

The remaining verses of the chapter show that if we are called upon to suffer for the Name of Christ, the character of Christ Himself will mark us as those belonging to God. Let us give earnest attention to all these features, to the end that they may rightly mark us in our lives while in this world — a witness to men that God has called us "out of darkness into His marvellous light" (verse 9). What could be more calculated to give pleasure to our God?