

## **"Our Imperishable Inheritance"**

As we continue in our study of I Peter, we come this morning to verses three through five of chapter one. This is our third message overall in this precious book. Up to this point we've discussed the author of the book, Peter, as well as the recipients of his letter, elect exiles. Further, we noted that the overall purpose of his letter was to encourage them in light of the suffering they were experiencing because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

I want to express again today that everything we read and study as we work our way through the book is best understood in the context of Peter's desire to bring comfort to them as suffering Christians. Peter brings up the topic of suffering on several occasions and in various ways throughout the book. Everything we read and discuss in the weeks ahead must be with that in mind.

Now this morning, in verses three through five, Peter brings to completion his overall introduction to the book. And what an introduction it's been! There are few books in all of scripture that contain the depth and breadth of foundational theology that's contained in these five verses.

Now in order for us to come away with all that these verses contain, let me take the time, however briefly, to review what we've discussed thus far. Doing so will assist us in appreciating the particular passage we'll focus on this morning.

Three weeks ago, as we began our study of the book, we took the time to examine exactly what Peter meant in referring to the recipients of this letter as "elect exiles." The people to whom he was writing may not have been literal exiles, displaced from their homes and forced to live in a foreign land; but they were exiles in the sense that, because of their faith in Christ, they were aliens to the culture and society in which they lived.

That applies to us as well. We too are exiles because of the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. We are foreigners to the values, morals, desires, pursuits, ethics, standards and ideals of the culture in which we live. We are in the world but not of the world. Thus, much of what Peter directed toward them is equally important and applicable for us in our day.

We also spent considerable time examining what Peter meant when he used the word "elect." If you recall, the word appears fifteen times in the Bible, exclusively in the New Testament. The word means "one who is chosen, one who is selected and picked out by God." In linking the words "elect exiles," Peter is presenting them with the theology of their situation. He wants them to know that their present circumstances as aliens, as well as the suffering they are experiencing, is part of what God elected, chose and purposed for them. They were chosen for this reason, both unto salvation and to suffer for Christ's name; to reside as aliens in the lands where they lived.

But Peter had more to say about that as he proceeded to explain the mechanism whereby they came to be elect exiles. In verse two, he made reference to the foreknowledge of God as the means whereby they were chosen unto salvation, as well as chosen to be exiles. We spent a good deal of time discussing exactly what Peter meant in using the phrase “the foreknowledge of God.” As I mentioned at the time, this is no small matter in that the foreknowledge of God is central to who God is and how he governs his creation.

If you recall, the word “foreknowledge” means to have knowledge beforehand, to know something ahead of time. In mentioning the foreknowledge of God, Peter made reference to God knowing ahead of time those whom he would elect unto salvation, as well as those who would become exiles.

But there’s more. We can’t attribute foreknowledge to God unless we agree that his knowing something ahead of time also involves his sovereign ability to prearrange and predetermine that that which he knows beforehand will indeed come to pass. Thus, God’s foreknowledge must of necessity engage his sovereign ability to orchestrate that which he foreknows. To limit or diminish God’s foreknowledge is to strip God of his divine omniscience and sovereignty. The Bible does not permit us to cross that line.

There is now one additional thing Peter made a point to emphasize in his introduction to the letter. He noted in verse two the process whereby the foreknowledge of God becomes effective in the lives of those whom he elects unto salvation. I made the point of stressing that verse two provides us with a glimpse into the mind and heart of God as it relates to the redeemed.

What God foreknew he made come to pass through the sanctifying work of the Spirit as sinners express faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. In other words, verse two describes the Christian’s relationship with each member of the Trinity, and here is how it works. The order is Father, who foreknows and orchestrates; Spirit, who reveals it to the sinner; and Son, who makes salvation possible through his death and resurrection. Father, Spirit, Son is the order of salvation present throughout the New Testament. Peter was intentional and forceful in expressing this to his readers.

If you choose, get a transcript or CD of our previous messages so that you might have a more complete understanding of what we’ve discussed thus far.

All of that now is meant to serve as a brief introduction to where we’ve been so that we might better understand verses three through five, where Peter wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

In total, these five verses reflect Peter’s desire to align and compare their suffering to the certainty of heaven that awaits them. In pointing to what awaits them -- an inheritance kept in heaven for them -- Peter is framing their present experience against God’s assurance of their future inheritance.

Let me say that again, for it applies to us as well. Peter wanted them to know that the suffering they were experiencing was part of God’s plan for them; just as the inheritance that awaited them is part of God’s plan as well. That’s why he can say in verse six, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while if necessary you have been grieved by various trials.” So in that light, our task is to better understand the component parts of what Peter referred to as their inheritance.

The first thing Peter made certain of is to reinforce their understanding of the origin of their salvation. Look at the text: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again.” Here Peter clearly identified God as the one who has given salvation according to his abundant mercy. He caused it to happen apart from any merit on their part. Put that in the context of what we already know about God’s foreknowledge and the activity of the Father, Spirit, and Son in bringing the plan of salvation to completion.

But I want us to note in particular the exact wording Peter used: “...caused us to be born again.” This is the only time in the entirety of scripture where we see this phrase used. “Caused us to be born again to a living hope” literally means to have one’s mind changed so that the individual lives a new life conformed to the will of God. Is that not a proper definition of what transpires once one is born again? But note especially God’s motivation for the individual being born again. It’s according to God’s great mercy. Thus the basis for the Christian’s existence as “born again to a living hope” is the mercy of God.

Mercy is clearly one of the primary characteristics of God attributed to him throughout the scriptures. The word in its fullest sense means “kindness or good will expressed toward the miserable and afflicted.” Is that not a perfect description of men apart from Christ? Men are miserable and afflicted, hopelessly destitute, possessing nothing within themselves to make them attractive or acceptable to God.

Peter’s fellow apostle, Paul, put it this way in Ephesians 2: “Remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise; having no hope and without God in the world.” Can you catch what Peter did in making reference to the mercy of God? He reminded them of the remedy for the hopeless situation men are in; that being God’s mercy manifested in Christ, which is the means whereby men are caused to be born again. Note carefully the consequence, the result of the new birth Peter spoke of. It results in a living hope and a sure inheritance. Let’s talk now about each of these.

First, as to a living hope: this is the only time in scripture where we see the words “living hope” combined in this manner. Living means “alive, active and endless.” Hope means “expectation of something good.” In using this particular phrase, Peter wanted his readers to know that their expectation for something good in their future is active, alive, blessed and endless. There can be no loss of hope for their future inheritance because their expectation for good is endless, precisely because they have been caused by God to be born again to such a hope.

Do you see what Peter has done for these suffering Christians? He’s laid the theological foundation for God’s foreknowledge, God’s choice of them unto salvation, as well as their present circumstances. He’s explained for them the mechanism whereby the Father, Spirit and Son worked in their lives, with the mercy of God as the driving force behind God’s actions; with all of that culminating in the living hope they have for a future inheritance. Can you imagine a more meaningful way to come alongside those who are suffering because of their faith in Christ? That’s powerful and practical theology of the best sort.

But look once again at the text. Peter does not stop there. He proceeded to make direct reference to their inheritance; and more than that, the wonderful blessing that comes from knowing that God himself guards it for them. That’s awesome! “...To an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Now there are several words in these two verses that call for our careful consideration. Look at them with me. First is the word “inheritance.” It’s easy enough for us to understand. It implies passing something of value from one person or one generation to another. This was a big deal in the ancient world. The word itself is used more than 200 times in the Bible, with the same connotation of meaning in each instance.

When we think of an inheritance, it’s generally in the form of earthly possessions: property or money. But -- and here’s a significant difference from our understanding of the word inheritance -- what Peter is speaking of is spiritual in nature. It can’t be measured or framed in the form of what we generally think of regarding an inheritance. This spiritual inheritance comes to us as a result of being born again to a living hope, born out of God’s mercy. It’s inherited by us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is a principle that’s contained throughout the New Testament. What’s passed on is the inheritance. The person receiving it is called an heir. In Titus 3:7 we read, “So that being justified by his grace, we become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” God is the benefactor, we are the beneficiaries. What he bequeaths is salvation. What we receive is eternal life kept in heaven for us.

But note; there's a huge difference between an earthly inheritance and a spiritual one. Earthly inheritances are prone to diminish over time. Not so with a spiritual inheritance. Peter used very specific words in this regard. He described the inheritance as imperishable, undefiled and unfading. Literally, Peter is saying that this spiritual inheritance is un-decaying, unsoiled and eternally undiminished in value. There's absolutely nothing in this world, nothing that one person can bequeath to another, about which those words might be used; and here's now where this gets truly exciting.

Immediately after describing the permanency of the inheritance, the fact that throughout all eternity it never loses its value, Peter goes on to say that it is "kept in heaven for you." Note the phrase "kept in heaven." It means that the inheritance is guarded, preserved, completely prevented from ever being lost. That speaks of security and permanence, does it not? But note carefully who does the guarding: "...who by God's power are being guarded." This inheritance which is kept in heaven, that which is un-decaying, unsoiled and undiminished, is reserved and guarded by God himself.

That's stunning, is it not? In that light, can I put to rest any doubts about the eternal security of those whom God in his foreknowledge has elected unto salvation? God does the calling, God does the causing, and God does the guarding. And note carefully the specific object being guarded by God's power: our faith. It's faith that saved us, it's faith that keeps us saved; and blessedly, it's God who guarantees our faith, resulting in the inheritance that's kept in heaven for us. Our inheritance isn't apart from faith, it's through faith so that the true believer is protected by God and given a sustaining and persevering faith.

No one is saved apart from faith; no one remains saved apart from faith. We are saved through faith and kept through faith. It flows from God's mercy brought to us in his foreknowledge; revealed to sinners through the Holy Spirit, purchased by Jesus Christ, eternally preserved, guarded and protected by the Father.

Would you reach down right now and check your pulse? Such incredible spiritual truths should set every Christian's heart racing.

All of that is meant to point us, in Peter's words, to a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Christians are guarded by God's power until they are ushered into a salvation that's now ours with its fullness yet to be revealed. It's ours now because of the past events of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Yet there is a future aspect to salvation as well. When Christ appears again to take unto himself all of his redeemed, when Christ ushers them into the fullness of what's currently being reserved in heaven for them, at that point the wonders of future glory -- that which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading -- will be ours for all eternity. That's the moment, in

Peter’s words, when God’s final goal of redemptive history is manifest in the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Let me now bring our consideration of Peter’s introduction to this letter to a close. I know that over the course of the past three weeks, in working our way through Peter’s introduction, we’ve covered a significant amount of foundational theology. But we must never allow ourselves to think that theology is not acutely practical for us. Those to whom Peter wrote were suffering, as some of you are even today. Peter wanted his readers then and now to take great comfort in the sovereignty of God over their present circumstances.

We are called unto salvation, and just as surely called to suffer; suffering is an integral part of the Christian life. Yet in the midst of it, Peter reminds us of the magnificent plan of salvation: foreknown by God, made evident by the Holy Spirit, and purchased by Jesus Christ. And further, he wants us to rest securely in God’s promise that he guards our faith so that we might look ahead to an inheritance that’s kept in heaven for us, a sure salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Thus, our present trials are nothing in comparison to the glory that is yet to be laid bare before our eyes.

But I must ask; do you have the promise of such an inheritance. Do you? You can, even today. Peter made the path abundantly clear. All men are sinners, completely unable to do anything to save themselves. God has taken the initiative in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, as the perfect Savior for all sinners, even the worst. We must cry unto Christ; agreeing with him that we are sinners. By faith, we must ask him to be our Savior. He will do the rest.

Peter’s promise of an eternal inheritance can be yours today as you look unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross to bring to sinners the imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance Peter spoke of.