

Chapter 3: A Royal Priesthood

1 Peter 2:1–10

As Peter continues to develop his teaching for us “elect exiles,” he has moved from a high level celebration of the eternal inheritance that awaits us (even in the midst of trials we suffer in this life; 1 Pet. 1:3–12) into a warning that we must gird the loins of our mind to follow Jesus with sober-minded focus (1 Pet. 1:13–25). In this next passage, Peter zooms out again to see the broader picture of what the Lord is doing in and through Jesus Christ, before he will zoom back in to examine very practical duties for Christians within society and the home (1 Pet. 2:11–3:7). Before moving on to those details, Peter wants to make sure that we do not miss the forest for the trees. Toward this end, he calls us to *contemplate the goodness of Jesus Christ*.

Tasting that the Lord is Good (1 Pet. 2:1–3)

Peter transitions into this passage by the word “therefore” (ESV: “so”; v. 1a). Thus, Peter links his exhortations in this section as a logical outflow of “what has just been said in 1:23–25 about our having been begotten again by means of God’s living and abiding Word. Born anew of the Word, we must be nourished to growth by the Word.”¹ Peter says that we must “put away” (cp. Eph. 4:25; Heb. 12:1; Jas. 1:21) specific sins. Whereas he earlier warned not to be “conformed to the passions of your former ignorance” (1 Pet. 1:14), he now identifies the need to put away sins that are very commonplace: “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (v. 1). Davids notes that these are “not the grosser vices of paganism, but community-destroying vices that are often tolerated by the modern church.”² Schreiner also notes the dangers of these sins on life together in the church: “The sins listed tear at the social fabric of the church, ripping away the threads of love that keep them together. Peter signals thereby that no sin is to be tolerated in the community, that sin is to be rejected comprehensively.”³

We must leave behind these old ways of living, since we have been born again (1 Pet. 1:3, 23ςς), so that we are now like “newborn infants” (v. 2). Peter’s intention in this idea is, as Calvin notes, to illustrate that it “is not, then, sufficient for us to have been once called by the Lord, except we live as new creatures.”⁴ Particularly, Peter calls us to “long” (i.e., strongly desire; “yearn” Jas. 4:5) for something. The longing/craving for spiritual milk (ἐπιποθέω; *epipothēō*) contrasts with warnings against the desires of the passions (1 Pet. 1:14; ἐπιθυμία; *epithumia*). These are two different words, although they both describe forms of desires. In Greek translations of the Old Testament, this word

¹ Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 76.

² Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 80.

³ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 98.

⁴ Calvin, “Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter,” 61.

appears regularly in the Psalms to describe a particular yearning for the Lord (Ps. 42:1; 62:10; 84:2; 119:131, 174).⁵ In this particular usage, Peter is extending his contrast between being drunk on worldly things and being “sober-minded” (1 Pet. 1:13) in order to crave pure, spiritual milk.

The word translated in the ESV for “spiritual” is a different word from what Peter uses later for “spiritual” in v. 5.⁶ Here, the word for this “spiritual” milk is λογικός (*logikos*): “Its primary meaning was ‘rational’ or ‘spiritual’ in the sense of that which distinguished the human or divine from merely material things or from animals.”⁷ Importantly, *milk* serves as a symbol of the word of God in the writings of Paul and the author of Hebrews (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:13); however, in both of those contexts, *milk* is contrasted in its simplicity with *meat*, which symbolizes true depth in the word of God. Here, however, Peter suggests no such contrast: “the milk of the abiding word is simply the Christian’s necessary food.”⁸ Was a symbol for the teaching and preaching of God’s word, *milk* here puts an emphasis on the role of the *mind*: “The means by which God sanctifies believers is through the mind, through the continued proclamation of the word. Spiritual growth is not primarily mystical but rational, and rational in the sense that it is informed and sustained by God’s word.”⁹ Particularly, the milk of God’s word trains us to understand and appreciate the *goodness* of the Lord (v. 3; cf. Ps. 34:8).¹⁰

We should be clear, though, what this idea does *not* mean. Peter is not saying that we grow by the mere consumption and memorization of information. The two facts that (1) we should *long* for this pure, rational milk, and (2) we should taste the Lord’s goodness through that milk, both suggest a deeper level of involvement of the whole person in receiving this word. The idea posed constantly in Scripture is much more along the lines of *meditation* and *contemplation* than mere mastery of the material. We cherish God’s Word; we do not memorize it by brute force.

The Goodness of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4–10)

How, then, does the pure and spiritual milk nourish us? How do we taste (and see) that the Lord is good through this milk of God’s Word? Peter then immediately demonstrates the supreme object identified in the message of the Scriptures through three quotations that all involve around the idea of a “stone.” He frames this discussion by describing Jesus as “a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious” (v. 4b). In light of the many warnings in Scripture against the *dead* idols made of stone, Michaels plausibly suggests that portraying Jesus as the “living stone” implies “contrast with the hopelessness and idolatry of contemporary paganism.”¹¹ Most of all, we should recognize how relating to Jesus as a living stone demands a transformation in the orientation of our desires. Whereas the world rejected Jesus, the pure and spiritual milk of God’s Word teaches us to see God’s Son as the Father sees him: as “chosen and precious.”

Then, Peter builds upon the image of Jesus Christ as a living stone: “you yourselves like living

⁵ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 99. In the LXX, the references are as follows: Ps. 41:2; 61:11; 83:3; 118:131, 174.

⁶ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 87.

⁷ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 87.

⁸ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 57.

⁹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 100.

¹⁰ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 88–89.

¹¹ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 98.

stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (v. 5). As those who have been born again to a living hope through Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3), we have been made with him into living stones that grow together into a “spiritual house” as a “holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices.”¹² These spiritual sacrifices are no longer the sacrifices of animals, but of the proclamation of “the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9).¹³

With this introduction in place, Peter begins to draw out the stunning message of the Scriptures, beginning with his quotation of Isaiah 28:6: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (v. 6).¹⁴ Clowney summarizes the context in Isaiah 28 as a scene of danger and the need for refuge well:

Isaiah speaks the word of the Lord against the princes of Jerusalem who foolishly suppose that their city is secure against the threat of invasion. They speak as though they had a treaty with death and hell so that the lethal waters of the abyss could never sweep over them. God declares that their pride is no refuge, their covenant with death no security. Only one edifice can stand against the storm of destruction: God’s building, established upon one sure foundation stone.¹⁵

There is honor for those who believe, but for those who do not believe, Peter cites his second Scripture text from Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (v. 7). This cornerstone sits in the corner of the foundation, giving strength and stability to the whole structure.¹⁶ This means that Jesus, the living cornerstone, is not a mere option. All those who reject him will stumble as they take offense at him. Peter, quoting his third text from Isaiah 8:14, writes “‘A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (v. 8).

This dense section of Scripture quotations is not a digression. Rather, it has an important point in the overall flow of Peter’s argument. Specifically, Peter wants his readers to feed on the pure milk of the gospel of what Jesus Christ has done for them. They have not only been born again to a living hope, but their lives have been incorporated into a spiritual temple, where the Lord is worshiped by spiritual sacrifices of praise. *This* is the life to which they have been called and, the more that they taste it, the more they will declare that the Lord is good (v. 3).

In the final section, Peter makes it clear that his readers move beyond the ethnic Jews scattered in the Diaspora (1 Pet. 1:1). Rather, we see that Peter is appropriating language of the Old Testament in order to

¹² Keener, *1 Peter*, 128.

¹³ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 70.

¹⁴ While Peter quotes the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX), which has “not be put to shame,” the Hebrew has “not be in haste” (ESV). See Keener, *1 Peter*, 134–35.

¹⁵ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 60–61.

¹⁶ “The word ‘cornerstone’ (*akrogōnian*) is understood by some as referring to the top stone in a building or the keystone in an arch. This interpretation should be rejected, for the reference to stumbling in v. 8 indicates that a stone on the ground is intended. Further, the Septuagint makes clear that the reference is to the foundation (*themelia*).” (Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 109.)

characterize the church, which involves both Jews and Gentiles together.¹⁷ In v. 9, Peter alludes to Exodus 19:5-6: “you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This language is not merely descriptive, for “these are not static but dynamic terms; they include what Peter puts into the purpose clause, in which we may read an undertone of admonition: ‘in order that you may announce abroad...the fame of the one who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.’”¹⁸ In v. 10, he underscores the grace that God has bestowed upon his people more sharply, by alluding to the names of Hosea’s children: No Mercy and Not My People (Hos. 1:6-2:1, 13).

Discussion Questions

1. How does the word “therefore” (ESV: “so”) function in v. 1a? What kinds of sins are represented by “malice,” “deceit,” “hypocrisy,” “envy,” and “slander” (v. 1b)? Why are they dangerous? Who struggles with those sins? Within the context of the whole letter, why does Peter here compare believers to “newborn infants” (v. 2a)? Why does Peter characterize the milk of Scripture as “rational” (ESV: “spiritual”; v. 2b)? How does the Word teach us that the Lord is good (v. 3)?
2. Why does Peter call Jesus a “living stone” (v. 4a)? In how many ways was he “rejected by men” (v. 4b)? What are we to learn from the fact that, despite such rejection, Jesus was nevertheless “chosen and precious” in God’s sight (v. 4c)? In what sense are we “like living stones” (v. 5a)? What kind of “spiritual house” are we built into (v. 5b)? What are our “spiritual sacrifices” (v. 5c)? What is your specific role in God’s spiritual house?
3. How many Old Testament passages does Peter quote in vv. 6-8? What does Peter mean when he calls Jesus the “cornerstone” (v. 6)? Why does Peter celebrate the fact that Jesus was rejected by the “builders” (v. 7)? Why is Peter so insistent that many will “stumble” over Jesus as a “rock of offense” (v. 8)? By contrast, how does Peter characterize believers (v. 9-10)? How does Peter draw off of language from Exodus 19? What significance does that have?
4. How has this passage and the previous passage challenged you in the way that you steward your mind in the meditation of and contemplation upon Christ and his gospel? Why is the contemplation of God’s Word with our minds so important for shaping our affections and guiding the decisions of our wills? How are you allowing the impulses of your bodily passions to drive you on in life? How might you cultivate godly affections (and subsequent godly actions) through godly contemplation?

¹⁷ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 75; Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 66.

¹⁸ Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 102-03.