

Peter:

The Importance of People to God

Study Guide

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An Important Note To Students And Teachers

This material is the third quarter adult study on the theme of the importance of people to God. It continues the emphasis of the first two quarters. This is the thesis of the series: When Christians understand how valuable people are to God, they (as God's people) will look at themselves and all people differently. That includes people in the church and out of the church. That includes people regardless of their background. That includes all people regardless of the mistakes they have made in the past or the focus of their lives in the past.

Helping people who are quite different from ourselves requires (1) adjustments as we seek to be helpful and (2) learning how to effectively communicate with those who are different so that they understand God's message and the genuineness of our interest in them as persons.

It is essential for Christians to understand the importance of people to God (1) if we are to be appropriately evangelistic and (2) if we are to approach problems among Christians correctly. Christians cannot merely dismiss those who are outside of Christ nor dismiss Christians they do not like.

In this quarter, it is important to note that the material was originally addressed to Christians. As the first century moved toward its conclusion, in some places it became increasingly difficult to continue Christian commitment and focus. Peter in his two writings encouraged Christians to continue as Christians.

Consider the introductions in both books:

(1 Peter 1:1, 2) Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

(2 Peter 1:1, 2) Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord...

In 1 Peter the focus is on (1) who they are, and (2) how do people like them endure suffering? In 2 Peter (1) he reminds them of who they are, and (2) reminds them of the fact that God's people always had discouragers among them.

In both books, the message is similar: Christians endure in hostile environments because of their relationship with a patient, caring God. It is essential that Christians see the caring, patient characteristics of God. It is also essential that Christians understand that suffering and discouragement are often a part of commitment to Jesus Christ. Even when there is suffering and discouragement, the importance of people to God is evident.

Lesson One

God's Gift of Salvation

Text: 1 Peter 1:3-12

The objective of this lesson: To stress that a Christian's salvation is the result of divine activity. Understanding this truth results in appreciating God's great love for people.

The focus of this lesson should challenge the thinking of every Christian--not because of the lesson but because of what God did and is doing for us. The sinless God's concern for sinful humanity defies human imagination. Stated in another way through a question: "How can the Holy God care so passionately and sacrificially about unholy humanity?"

God's enormous love for people is seen in the effort God makes to allow human salvation to be a reality. God's determination is incredible because God's determination is unwavering in spite of continued human failure.

To grasp the significance of this reality, a person must begin by considering God's character. While sin is common in humans, there is no sin in God. Whereas even the most godly person must be forgiven multiple times daily, God never has been sinful even once! Sin is the precise, exact opposite of God. When sin expresses itself in human evil motives and evil behaviors, it manifests itself in ways that offend God. There is no evil in God inwardly or in action! God does not sin! How can God, in whom there is no sin, love people who are full of sin? How can the God in whom there is no sin love humanity in whom sin resides? God loves the objects in whom resides that which deeply offends Him--to the point of revulsion! For God to love us, He must endure that which deeply offends him.

God's incredible determination to make salvation available to people is illustrated by God's willingness to endure that which is deeply offensive (sin) in order to love us (provide salvation to humans).

In providing humanity salvation, God gave (gives) saved humanity three incredible gifts. All three exist because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice that works as an expression of God's mercy. The three gifts: (a) a living hope; (b) an eternal inheritance; and (c) divine protection. Those gifts are NOT defined by human desire or expectation. Those gifts ARE defined by God's intent. Consider each of the three.

The three gifts Peter stressed may be received by people ONLY because of God's mercy shown in Jesus Christ. Without God's mercy, none of those gifts would be available to humans. Nothing people can do makes them deserving of those gifts.

The Living Hope. This hope is not based on Jesus' cross (this is no attempt to diminish the significance of Jesus' death) but on Jesus' empty tomb. The focus of the hope is not in Jesus' death but in Jesus' resurrection. It is not focused on Jesus' blood but on Jesus' life after death. In death Jesus paid the penalty for our sinfulness. In resurrection Jesus affirms that God is the power of life that surpasses the power of death. Just as he died and was resurrected to a new existence, we also can die to a godless existence and be resurrected to newness of life. In fact, the baptism of the person motivated by faith and repentance memorializes both Jesus' death and resurrection. Just as he died and was buried, we die to sin and bury our old sinful style of

life. Just as God resurrected Jesus to life in a new form to be the Christ, we are resurrected to a new form of existence as God's child in God's family (Romans 6:1-11; Ephesians 4:20-24). Baptism involves much more than a ritual act. It, at its "heart," involves the person's conscious commitment to a new existence with a new purpose. The remarkable divine forgiveness that begins with this resurrection does just that--BEGINS! John said this remarkable forgiveness is continuing (1 John 1:5-10). When a Christian repents of a sin he becomes aware of, God forgives him or her of ALL unrighteousness--that includes all things that are not compatible with the nature or character of the Holy God. All Christians likely sin far more in ignorance (a lack of awareness of matters that oppose God) than in conscious rebellion (a knowing refusal to do as God instructs). Every Christian is godly because he or she is forgiven, not because he or she has achieved goodness or perfection (Mark 10:18). We have a continuing hope of resurrection because of God's action in Jesus' resurrection.

Make certain that your students understand the basic distinction between Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection. BOTH are essential! Basically, in Jesus' death, God paid the penalty for human sin (consider Romans 3:23-26 and Ephesians 1:7). Basically, in Jesus' resurrection, God gave humans hope beyond death (consider Romans 6:5-11 and Philippians 3:10, 11). Christian hope is a living hope because Jesus Christ is alive. Our gratitude to God is not just found in appreciation of our forgiveness but also in our expectation that we will be raised from our death.

The Sturdy Inheritance. Among Christians there has been a tendency to depict God's inheritance as a fragile reality that is easily lost. That likely is a reaction to the concept that God's inheritance cannot be lost. Problems with theological reactions: (a) They often have a focus on one concern, and are thereby inadequate to address all of God's concerns. (b) They often emphasize extremes that affirm more than scripture actually teaches. (c) They can and sometimes do take a scriptural statement out of its context to justify a human position or conclusion. (d) They often are more concerned about defending a human stance than learning all that scripture teaches on a matter.

The Christian inheritance in Jesus Christ is not fragile. The New Testament affirms that the Christian inheritance can be lost (consider 2 Peter 2:20-22). It also affirms the Christian inheritance is not forfeited easily (consider Hebrews 10:35-39 in its contextual problem). Christians can stress forfeiture of inheritance to the point it destroys confidence in God and alters the biblical concept of faithfulness.

In context, Peter affirmed that salvation in Jesus Christ is durable and trustworthy. It is not a "maybe," "hope against hope," "iffy" concept. It is not a concept that God holds just outside human reach to tantalize and manipulate Christians.

The foundation of our salvation must be confidence in God's achievements in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Instead, Peter affirmed God's inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, and reserved. (a) "Imperishable" refers to the enduring nature of the Christian inheritance. In contrast, physical inheritances were subject then to decay, rust, insects, and theft (see Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19). God's inheritance endures beyond physical world realities. Physical inheritances are subject to physical realities and dangers. (b) "Undefiled" refers to the Old Testament concept of uncleanness. Something could occur that made an item or person unfit for holy use or holy service. Nothing could occur to make this inheritance unfit for a holy people serving the Holy God. (c) "Unfading" refers to the fact that nothing could cause this inheritance to become less

valuable. Such is not true of a physical inheritance. How would you like a physical inheritance tied to 8-track music recordings? (d) God's inheritance is reserved for the inheritors. God Himself is the assurance that this inheritance is secure. It will be there when claimed. It cannot be stolen or diverted to another use. You need not be concerned about any possibility of serving and sacrificing for nothing.

Peter's presentation is based on human confidence in God's determination.

God Protection. The living hope produces the sturdy inheritance that is God-protected for those in Christ. God protects through faith (confidence, trust). The God Who produced our salvation is the God Who protects us and our salvation. This protection does not mean Christians will escape bad physical realities. Peter already has referred to these people as scattered aliens. He will soon refer to them as distressed. God will not transform physical existence into something wonderful. Instead, He promises an eternal inheritance that will be wonderful. God has not failed when our physical existence is undesirable.

It is critically important that a Christian place his or her confidence in God's devotion to him or her. We are not on our own in Jesus Christ! NEVER! While we cooperate with God through obedience, we never depend on ourselves or our achievements.

In providing this for humans, God did something that prophets wanted and angels did not understand. How important are people to God? Not even the best, most devoted servants of God grasped what He would do in Jesus Christ! Yet, this supreme act of God is yours!

God's actions in the sacrifice of and resurrection of Jesus Christ did something for people that exceeds human imagination!

For Thought and Discussion:

1. Why should this lesson challenge your thinking?

It should challenge your thinking because of what God did and is doing for people.

2. What is necessary to grasp the significance of God's interest in humanity?

We must devote ourselves to understanding the character of God.

3. What three incredible gifts has God given us?

The three gifts are a living hope, an eternal inheritance, and divine protection.

4. On what is the living hope not based? On what is that hope based?

The hope is not based on Jesus' cross. It is based on the empty tomb (Jesus' resurrection).

5. Discuss the relationship between baptism and the living hope. *Just as Jesus was resurrected to a new form of life no longer subject to death, in baptism we die to sin to be resurrected to a new life. In this new life we expect God to resurrect us from physical death just as He resurrected Jesus from death.*

6. Name four problems with theological reactions.
 - a. *They often have a focus on only one concern and are inadequate to address all of God's concerns.*
 - b. *They can and often do emphasize extremes that affirm more than scripture actually teaches.*
 - c. *They can and often do take a scriptural statement out of its scriptural context to justify a position.*
 - d. *They often are more concerned about defending a human stance than learning all scripture teaches on a matter.*

7. What did Peter affirm about salvation in Jesus Christ?

He affirmed salvation in Jesus Christ is durable and trustworthy.

8. Discuss the meanings of "imperishable," "undefiled," "unfading," and "reserved."
 - a. *Imperishable--enduring in its nature*
 - b. *Undefiled--cannot be made unclean (impure or unholy).*
 - c. *Unfading--cannot become less valuable.*
 - d. *Reserved--assured to be available when claimed.*
9. Discuss what God's protection does not mean.

It does not mean those in Christ will escape bad physical realities.

Lesson Two

Grateful Recipients of God's Concern

Text: 1 Peter 1:13-21

The objective of this lesson: to stress foundation attitudes of Christian obedience to God.

How do people react when they understand that they are important to God? What is the appropriate human response? Is any human response to God necessary?

These are questions people frequently ask today about salvation. The key question is how are we supposed to react to God's incredible gifts? Today's lesson focuses on the way Peter said we as Christians should react.

After Peter emphasized the gifts God offered people in salvation, he stressed the appropriate response of those who accepted Jesus Christ. First, they would mentally ("gird up the loins of your mind") and bodily ("action") prepare themselves for serious involvement in their salvation. Second, they would consider themselves "obedient children," and that would significantly affect the way they lived. Third, they would regard their commitment to holiness as their life's most serious commitment. Fourth, in recognition of God's incredible investment in their salvation, they would hold God in profound respect (their "fear" is not the fear of terror, but the fear of sincere respect that makes a person intensely self-conscious instead of flippant or arrogant).

This is a general summation of appropriate reaction to God's kindness. Obviously, it is a "get involved" reaction rather than a "sit and do nothing" reaction.

The images Peter used were down-to-earth and most insightful. Peter used images from the common person's life, images that would be readily understood. Please consider and learn from Peter's images.

These are images geared toward the realities of the common person (the majority of people in the first century were poor people, with a small middle class and even smaller wealthy class). These are images that typify the lives of the majority, images that most people would understand instantly.

The first image had to do with common clothing for men and women. We would best understand the outer clothing as some type of robe. Garments with long skirts get in the way of most physical tasks! If a person was going to work hard doing physical labor, the first thing a man would want to do was limit any handicaps to his efforts. Often men wore what we would call a belt around their waist. Preparation for hard, prolonged, physical work involved getting ready to work. Preparation included tucking that lower robe into your belt so it would not get in the way of your work. This was a conscious, intentional preparation for a prolonged time of physical exertion. The person knew he had a demanding task ahead of him, and he planned to commit himself to the task without reservation--there was no "half-heartedness" in his preparation and commitment!

Outer garments for most people of the first century in the Mediterranean and Palestine area would be described by us as a flowing robe. The majority of people could not afford numerous changes of clothing. Often the outer garment had to be suitable for everyday social life and

work. Commonly, men would either discard the robe or gather up the skirt of the robe so that clothing would not hinder the person as he did the task (see John 21:7 as an example--imagine how difficult it would be to cast a fishing net in a robe). When the outer garment was gathered up, it was tucked under the girdle (belt) to be stored out of one's way. One did not "gird up his loins" unless he committed himself to a task. Such indicated serious commitment.

To be certain, this was not a "please do it for me" effort. This was a personal effort that fully anticipated hard work. One entered the task expecting it to be demanding physical effort! We do people no favor when we convince them "it is easy to be a Christian." When people who expect ease confront hard choices and demanding effort, they become discouraged easily. Christians should never equate "ease" with "worth the effort." Living for God will be worth the effort, but will never be easy. We should never think opposing Satan is easy! Possible with God's help--YES! Easy--NO!

One did not "gird up his loins" if he expected another to do the task. It was the act of a person who knew he was going to work hard physically and was preparing himself to work. Salvation involves hard work. Such commitment should be anticipated. The person commits himself to hard work when he (she) accepts salvation as God's gift. The work is not done to earn the salvation, but to show appreciation for the salvation.

The second image is that of "obedient children." In every generation there are children who obey and children who do not. If a child does not yield to appropriate authority, he or she does so to his or her own hurt (that is the "discipline" illustration in Hebrews 12:3-7). Two qualities of obedient children stood out. (1) First, they were respectful. They honored appropriate authority. They recognized they (a) did not know everything and (b) made mistakes which needed to be corrected. (2) Second, the child wished to become like his father. In societies that placed great emphasis on the value and significance of extended families, children commonly wanted to be like their fathers. The significance of that fact was applied to godly people being shaped by God's behavior in Matthew 5:44, 45. In those societies, it was frequent and appropriate for obedient children to aspire to be like their fathers. It is appropriate for Christians to allow God to be their example.

Obedient children wanted to model their fathers whom they respected. It was a compliment to have someone say, "You are obviously 'X's' son (or daughter)." For them to follow God as their Father meant they wished to reflect God's character in their actions.

When a child becomes a parent, he or she understands the value and the purpose of obedience in children. In this instance, the adult human must see himself as the child in need and God as the Father who supplies the human need.

Nothing reveals the value of being an obedient child as does being a parent.

The third image Peter used was the image of holiness. Even in the south, people live in a very secular society. There is a conscious effort in the American nation to become even more secular. There is a deliberate attempt to separate all expression of government from all expressions of religion. Because of this atmosphere, it is difficult for us to appreciate fully Peter's point.

Our "real life circumstances" hinder our grasp of Peter's point. Caution: do not get into a detailed discussion of views concerning our society's attempts to separate church and state. That discussion is a valid discussion; it is just not the point of this lesson. The point: they were quite accustomed to a relationship between the government and deity that we are not accustomed to.

In the first century (and before), it was unthinkable that a society anywhere would separate government and its influences from the gods and their influences. If one visited a city, there were temples and religious buildings in use in the immediate area of government buildings in use. Commonly, religious holidays were also national holidays. They wanted the gods involved in governmental decisions and governmental works. It was unthinkable that a prominent government figure would not consult the gods prior to an important decision.

This was a common situation in predominantly gentile cities where gentiles controlled civic affairs.

Even Israel was a theocracy--a government ruled by God. Frequently, even kings less than good consulted God through God's spokesman (for an example, consider Saul in 1 Samuel 15 and especially note verses 24 and 28; also consider the kings in 2 Kings 3:10-12). Judges and kings ruled as human directors of government, but it was understood that God ruled them. Their rulings always were to be consistent with God's intents.

This was the devout Jew's attitude toward a Jewish king in Israel. For examples, see 1 Samuel 24:8-15 and 26:13-16.

The holiness of God demanded Christians be committed to holiness.

The fourth image Peter used is understood in any age--money. Precious things were acquired with the most valuable form of money they knew--silver and gold. Their salvation was acquired by something more precious than the most valuable form of money they knew. Money did not purchase their salvation. The blood of God's Messiah (Christ and Messiah are the same concept: Messiah is Hebrew; Christ is Greek) purchased their salvation. That blood meant more to God than any amount of silver and gold.

The most valuable form of human wealth was insignificant when compared to the price God paid for human salvation.

Christians have a profound awareness of the value of people to God.

Awareness of the gifts God gave in our salvation and the price God paid for our salvation stresses the value of people to God.

For Thought and Discussion

1. List the four images Peter used as emphasized in this lesson.
 - a. *The image of girding up the loins.*
 - b. *The image of obedient children.*
 - c. *The image of holiness.*
 - d. *The image of money or human wealth.*
2. Discuss the image of "girding up your minds for action."

In the discussion, stress it was an image of preparation for physical work that anticipated endurance. Note the commitment involves the mind.

3. Discuss the image of "obedient children."

In the discussion, stress it was the image of a child who wished to please and reflect his father.

4. Discuss the image of "holiness" in the text of this lesson.

In the discussion, stress it was an image that emphasized the importance of separation from evil. Since the Father has no sin in Him, the children seek to separate themselves from all forms of evil.

5. Discuss the image of "silver and gold."

In the discussion, stress the image declares that salvation is a serious opportunity involving enormous cost. Its enormous cost demands that those who receive it do so seriously.

6. From what did Peter take these images?

He took the images from common people's lives.

7. Of what do Christians have a profound awareness"

They have a profound awareness of the importance of people to God.

8. Discuss why our commitment to salvation should be a serious commitment (verse 13).

In this discussion emphasize that every aspect of God's involvement in our salvation was a serious, determined commitment.

Lesson Three

The Christian Focus

Text: 1 Peter 1:22-25

The objective of this lesson: to allow the unique nature of salvation to verify the importance of people to God.

Peter is now challenging his readers to think rather than place their minds on "cruise control." A problem plaguing people in every age is this: people conclude that all understanding has occurred--"all we need to do is follow the thinking of those before us." Thus, they transform salvation in Jesus Christ into a "form" from their familiar past. If Peter's letter is to Jewish Christians, they interpreted salvation in Jesus Christ from the perspective of patterns and traditional procedures in Judaism. If it was to gentile Christians, they transformed salvation in Jesus Christ into forms and rituals of the type of idolatry they practiced. To use our words, "religion was religion--this new religion is just based in Jesus Christ."

Stress that it is easy to separate the importance of faith from the importance of thinking. One of the significant objectives of scripture is to make believers think.

Peter said, "No! That is not a correct assumption!" Note the things Peter had already stressed: (1) He called their attention to the fact the sacrifice was different (1:2). God sacrificed for the people instead of the people sacrificing for the deity. (2) God gave the gifts to people rather than people giving gifts to God (1:3-5). As an expression of His mercy, He gave them a living hope, an indestructible inheritance, and divine protection. (3) God paid an unbelievable price to make this happen (1:17-21). (4) Those humans closest to God knew He planned to do something incredible (1:10-12).

Emphasize the fact that Peter wanted his original readers to understand the religious uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ. If Christians do not grasp the uniqueness of God's salvation, they will not understand the uniqueness of the impact that salvation has on them as people. Christians will behave distinctively because their salvation is distinctive.

Their appropriate response was (1) to believe what God did through Jesus Christ (1:7-9) and (2) be as serious in serving God as God was serious about providing them salvation in Jesus Christ (1:13, 14). Their obedience would not be a "going through the motions so we can belong" type of obedience. It would be an obedience that recognized and rejoiced in the uniqueness of this new form of salvation. It would be an obedience that appreciated God's holiness and God's sacrificial nature.

*Accepting God's salvation in Jesus Christ requires a human response. Obedience is the form (medium) of that response, but the response is much deeper than physical acts. **Why** a person obeys is as significant as **what** the person does in obedience. The obedient response comes from the conviction of faith in God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ (it is a heart response as well as a physical response). If the inward conviction is absent, the outward deed is meaningless. It is impossible 'to go through the motions' and please God.*

For some time, there has been a tendency to separate 'the truth' from Jesus Christ. That separation exists to (1) increase our comfort level and (2) distinguish us from other religious

movements that appeal to Jesus Christ. The reasoning seems to be this: (1) we are unique because of what we believe. We believe 'the truth'--so it is our theological forms that make us religiously unique. (2) Anyone can believe Jesus is Lord. Such belief takes neither great insight nor understanding. To say Jesus is Lord means little today. (3) Therefore, 'what' you believe is more important than 'who' you believe in. Followed to its end conclusion, believing 'the truth' is more important than believing in 'the Savior.' Thus the truth and the Savior do not have to agree.

Stress that it is impossible to separate 'the truth' from Jesus Christ--for any reason! What a Christian believes and does cannot be inconsistent with who Jesus was (is).

The point is not that what one believes is unimportant. The point is that Christians must place their confidence in Jesus Christ through an understanding acceptance of what God did through him. There is a significant effort in Bible writers to create an unbreakable bond between Jesus and truth. Consider the gospel of John. Speaking of Jesus, the Word became flesh and lived among people, full of truth (1:14). Truth was 'realized' in (NASV) ['came by or through'--KJV, RSV, TEV, NIV, JB, NEB] Jesus (1:17). The person who practices truth comes to Jesus in order to make it evident that his actions are from God (3:21). Jesus heard the truth from God (8:40). With believing Jews, He associated discipleship, truth, and freedom with existing in him--and those people were offended (8:31-33). The night Jesus was arrested, he said he was the truth (14:6). That same night he said people who belong to truth listen to him (18:37).

The objective is not found in suggesting that what a person believes is unimportant. The objective of all Christians is to seek an increasingly accurate understanding of God's will in Jesus. The objective is to refuse to separate faith in Jesus from the existence of the truth.

Paul affirmed truth was in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21).

Divine truth does not exist apart from Jesus, and Jesus is the manifestation of divine truth. Thus an action or concept that is not in keeping with Jesus' character or words is not divine truth. That which is in keeping with Jesus' character and words is divine truth. When Christians look for truth, they begin with Jesus, and they never separate truth and Jesus. The truth that results in obedient salvation is not something that can be separated from Jesus Christ. In that understanding is comfort, and in it is fear--comfort when our practices are compatible with Jesus, fear when our practices are not.

As Christians continue their search for an understanding of 'the truth,' that search must include a continual commitment to better understand Jesus. Spiritually, truth is never inconsistent with the character and words of Jesus.

Peter wanted his readers to understand the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ. What was the result of being 'born again' from a conception occurring from a divine process? What was the result of knowing that the physical was like the temporary grass and its flowers? What was the result of understanding that the salvation at work in them was eternal? What was the result of having Jesus Christ proclaimed to them?

The uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ is expressed in the behavior of the person, which includes his or her behavior in all relationships.

The result was this incredible bond that existed between all who were born again in Jesus Christ. The result was a love that linked such believers that was sincere, fervent, and from the heart. The result of the purification produced by obedience to the truth expressed itself in a love between those in Christ that was not seen in other human relationships.

Nowhere will that Christian behavior be more evident than in Christian-to-Christian relationships. There is a unique bond between Christians that exists nowhere else. That bond expresses itself in seeking each other's best and highest interests.

How unique this salvation is! Rather than honoring the God who made the salvation possible, it honors those remade in God's image (a second time!) with this uncommon love. Christians are to treat Christians with a form of caring not witnessed in any other human-to-human relationship. They learn that form of caring from Jesus Christ. He taught Christians how to care for each other through the sacrificial gift of his life! He did not die for perfect people, but for people in desperate need. Christians do not love each other because 'they have it all together.' They love each other because they are committed to allowing Jesus Christ to teach them what 'having it together' in God means.

Peter said the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ is expressed in Christian-to-Christian caring for each other. This uniqueness is not dependent on perfection or agreement, but on being in Jesus Christ.

Incredibly, people are that important to God.

The fact that God willingly could make available to us this unique salvation in Jesus Christ stresses our importance to God.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. What is a continuing problem in every age?

The continuing problem in every age is the need to grasp as fact that Christians continue to need to think and understand.

2. What four things did Peter stress to show the uniqueness of salvation in Christ?
 - a. *God's sacrifice is different.*
 - b. *God gave gifts to people rather than people giving gifts to God.*
 - c. *God paid an unbelievable price.*
 - d. *Those Old Testament humans closest to God knew God planned to do something incredible.*
3. What was those Christians' appropriate response?

Their appropriate response was (1) to believe what God did in Jesus Christ, and (2) to be serious in serving God.

4. What tendency exists? What is the point?

The tendency is to separate 'the truth' from Jesus Christ. The point is to encourage Christians to place their confidence in Jesus Christ by understanding what God did through him.

5. How did John emphasize the relationship between truth and Jesus?

Examine John 1:14; 1:17; 3:21; 8:31-33; 8:40 ; 18:37. Place each scripture in context. The Gospel of John was the last of the New Testament gospels written. Is it not obvious in John's emphasis that the same basic problem of separating 'the truth' from Jesus Christ existed then?

6. What is the result of the bond between all those 'born again' in Jesus Christ?

The result is a form of love expressed in a mutual concern that is sincere, fervent, and from the heart.

Lesson Four

God's Trust in You Produces A Becoming For You

Text: 1 Peter 2:1-10

The objective of this lesson: To deepen our understanding of our response to God's caring for us.

The first part of this text (2:1-3) correctly belongs to the last thought of chapter one (1:22-25). Understanding what God did for them in Jesus Christ produced a permanent change in these Christians. That change expressed itself in an obvious manner by the way they treated people (especially people in Jesus Christ). The evidence demonstrating they looked upon other Christians as family loved sincerely, fervently from their hearts was this: they refused to use hatred in any form, deceit in any form, pretense, envy in any form (he used the plural), or slander in any form (he again used the plural) in their relationship with Christians.

When God truly changes us through Jesus Christ, His changes motivate us to treat people with a thoughtfulness and kindness that we did not even consider when we were slaves to sin. That change will be evident in the respect we feel and kindness we show to others who are in Jesus Christ.

They had a lot to learn, just as infants have much to learn. These new converts were (1) to see themselves as babies, (2) to recognize their need to grow and develop, and (3) to look to the word for their growth (the unadulterated spiritual milk that came from the word). God provided them salvation through His incredible accomplishments in Jesus Christ. It was now their responsibility to personally develop in that salvation.

Probably no understanding is more important than realizing we need to grow spiritually. It is so easy for us to become 'know-it-alls' who (with limited understanding of God or His will) have all the answers for everyone else. The center of our search should always be for a better understanding for self.

This development did not occur because it was the 'natural' way to function. It was not! In their former existence, hatred (ill will), deceit, pretense, desires to use others for personal benefit, and desires to ruin others by ruining their reputations were the 'natural' way to function. This new character they acquired through salvation in Jesus Christ was anything but natural!

It is critical that we understand as Christians that spiritual development commonly requires us to act in ways that are 'unnatural' as far as the influence of ungodliness is concerned.

They would not commit themselves to this new character in their relationships because it was 'natural.' They would commit to this new character because they tasted the Lord's kindness. Because they accepted (with a degree of understanding) the incredible things God did for them in Jesus Christ, God's kindness fundamentally changed them as people. God's kindness transformed them into a kind people.

Spiritual commitment requires the 'unnatural' in the consideration of those who are unconcerned about God's ways. God's ways are 'natural' to those in Jesus Christ only because they have

seen God's kindness. The ways of those in Christ result from a response to God's kindness in Jesus Christ.

There is much rich imagery in 2:4-10. Most Caucasian American Christians do not relate to that imagery. Many people in minorities understand those images quite well. Basically those images depict people who were on the 'outside,' knew they were on the 'outside,' and understood that nothing they did could put them 'inside.' Gentiles often despised Jews because Jews considered themselves as 'insiders' and all gentiles (anyone who was not Jewish) as 'outsiders.' Often those 'inside' were seen as arrogant and aloof. Too often those who considered themselves as 'insiders' were arrogant and aloof!

Those who have experienced being on the 'outside' wishing they could be 'in' quickly relate to the rich imagery in 2:4-10. To the people to whom Peter wrote, these images did not deal with a spiritual hypothetical. They understood how the kindness of God was given to them through God's achievements in Jesus. Jesus was opportunity, not a cause for tripping and falling.

In a way, what Peter said declared that all people had a right to be 'in' God's new kingdom or under His rule. Quite often Christians today look at Peter's statement as the right of all people to be a part of the church. That is correct if in affirming that fact, we use the first century concept of 'church.'

Peter said that in Jesus Christ those who were 'outside' could become God's people. That was always God's intent (Genesis 12:3).

What is meant by the first century concept of the church? Their concept of the church often is not the 21st century concept of the church. Our modern concept thinks of the church as an institution. The Greek word translated 'church' in English translations of the Bible is ekklesia. The word, prior to Christian usage, was not a religious word. It simply meant 'the called out.' It referred to any people who for any reason were 'called out' or distinguished from others to serve a designated purpose. In the terms of the early Christian movement, it referred to those men and women who were 'called out' from sin and its evil expressions by submitting to Jesus Christ in order to surrender their physical existence to God's purposes. Any person who gave himself or herself to Jesus Christ was a part of the 'called out.' Such people no longer lived for selfish purposes, or society's purposes, or physical purposes. Instead, they lived for God's purposes.

In order to change today's image of 'the church' into a more biblical concept of the church, we must change our concept of 'the church.' That change must include what we do as well as what is believed and how things are done. We are not called to be the member of an institution, but to adopt a life taught us by Jesus.

These people were to understand that God's purposes are defined by Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Christ redefined who they were and how they lived. Jesus Christ was their guide to and in God's ways. Jesus Christ redefined their existence, the nature of their relationships, and their human-to-human interactions. They trusted God's rock which was the cornerstone of His new temple. Their new relationship with God made them God's chosen race, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, or a people owned by God. Peter's concepts in today's text remind one of Paul's concepts in Romans 11:11-36. People who were in the past considered nothing were then considered significant.

We must give to Jesus--and only to Jesus--the right to define who we are as persons and how we live as God's people.

The concept associated with 'church' in this context primarily involved 'who you were' and 'what you were' because of God's acts through Jesus Christ. It primarily involved existing for reasons and in relationships that were not characteristic of their society. They were 'called out' of society's objectives, the emperor's objectives, and physical objectives to serve God through Jesus Christ for eternal objectives.

These people previously existed with a wrong concept of God or no concept of God. Many (if not all) of them did not come from 'good backgrounds' and 'good concepts' that were compatible with an accurate concept of a kind, involved, compassionate God. The transition from 'who they were' to who they are in Jesus Christ involved enormous changes. To understand that the concept of 'church' involved much more than belonging to a group involved radically new concepts. They were to be different because they were in Jesus Christ, not to be different for the sake of being different. God made them who they were. Allegiance to the kindness of God changed them.

Spiritually, the persons to whom Peter wrote were not accustomed to being considered specifically God's people. They were accustomed to being called the nondescript gentiles who did not belong to God. Now they are God's people in God's mercy because of God's achievements in Jesus Christ. No longer were they part of the spiritual darkness. Through Jesus Christ, God called them to be a part of His marvelous light.

They had to see themselves differently if they were to become different persons. If the change was to be more than 'habit deep' and involve the heart (who they were as persons), they had to know that they were God's people. God did not just tolerate them. They were His people.

This concept reminds one of Jesus' words in scriptures like John 10:16, Matthew 8:10-12, and Luke 13:23-30. Consider statements like Matthew 3:8, 9 and Galatians 3:26-29. Beware of placing your spiritual confidence in the wrong things! God can cast out those who are certain they are 'in' and bring in those who were certain they were cast out. The key is not who you consider yourself to be or where you came from, but your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Read the recommended passages. Place each in its context. Share the core thoughts with the class.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What evidence demonstrated they understood Peter's concept?

The evidence cited was the way they saw and treated other Christians.

2. List three ways Peter's message would change what these new converts saw.
 - a. *They saw themselves as spiritual babies.*
 - b. *They recognized their need to grow and develop.*
 - c. *They looked at the word as the source of their growth.*
3. What was these people's responsibility?

It was their responsibility to grow in the salvation God gave them.

4. This development did not occur because the development was what?

This development did not occur because it was 'natural.'

5. Most Caucasian Christians struggle to relate to the rich imagery in 2:4-10. Why?

They struggle because it is 'inside--outside' concepts, and they have never personally experienced being the 'outside' people.

6. When is it proper to relate what Peter said in this text to being the church?

It is proper if we use the 1st century concept of 'church.'

7. Discuss what we refer to when we speak of the concept of the 1st century church.

Be certain to include in the discussion the concept of being 'called out' of sin and its evil expressions to use one's life to fulfill God's purposes.

8. What did Jesus Christ redefine?

Jesus Christ redefined who they were and how they lived.

9. What did the concept associated with the church in this text involve?

It involved who they were and what they were because of God's acts in Jesus Christ.

10. What scriptures that use Jesus' words should we be reminded of?

It should remind us of Jesus' words in John 10:16, Matthew 8:10-12, and Luke 13:23-30.

Lesson Five

The New Behavior

Text: 1 Peter 2:11-3:12

Because Christians have come to Jesus Christ as the living stone, *because* they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession, they will be distinctively different. They will not be people who belong to this physical existence. The fact that they do not belong to a physical existence will be evident in two ways. (1) They will not live lives controlled by physical desire. (2) They will behave in ways that are consistent with who they are in Jesus Christ.

Being a Christian is much more than something you accept. Its objective is to become something you are. The objective of belonging to God is to make us different, to become a different person.

Why? (1) They realize life lived controlled by physical desire allows physical desire to wage war against spiritual existence. (2) They understand that godless people (idolaters) will reject Christians' commitment *if* their behavior and commitment are in disagreement. Please immediately note this truth: existence in this physical area is an unjust existence. Peter used a strong image. Physical desires **war** against spiritual existence. These desires wish to make useless any form of spiritual commitment in Jesus Christ. It would be simple to slander Christians if their behavior disrupted society. It was by godly behavior that eventually those who slandered Christians noted the desirable benefits of following God. The consistent behavior of those who belonged to Christ eventually caused the slanders to glorify God.

Christians must realize that the basic objective of evil influences is to destroy them spiritually. God in Jesus Christ is not seeking to deprive us, but to protect us. As our Father, He seeks his children's best interest as they face dangers they do not even recognize. Serving God and escaping Satan is not a game. It literally involves life and death choices.

What Peter wrote next was not anticipated in the first century. It certainly is not anticipated in our present century! In their world (and ours) sweeping social change that transforms human behavior was (and is) achieved by the control through conquest. In the context of their age, being a holy nation of people who belonged to God might have meant to them that they existed to totally disrupt their physical world. Peter in distinct ways said, "Not so!"

It is easy to conclude that the objective of 'God's kingdom' is a total disruption of social orders which are unconcerned about God. It is extremely difficult to realize Christians defeat evil by doing good. (See Paul's statement in Romans 12:21.)

The injunctions that Peter gave were for 'the Lord's sake.' Christians were to respect existing idol-worshipping political institutions. They would do the following: respect human institutions (political); honor the king (who was idolatrous) as the rightful authority; and respect the work and role of the local governor. Change would come through Christians' doing right, not through aggressive resistance. They would use their freedom in Christ as God's slaves (God's servants). They would honor all people, including the king. They would love each other and hold God in their highest esteem or reverence.

Two things are too simple: (1) To do things for our sake instead of the Lord's sake. (2) To be too impatient to influence through example rather than control.

Peter's instructions to these Christians which followed are nothing less than astounding. Christian slaves were to show submissive respect even to unreasonable owners (slavery was not a racial matter in the first century). God was impressed when slaves endured unjust suffering patiently. Jesus Christ was their example because the injustice he endured resulted in incredible blessings to the unrighteous.

A person could become a slave in numerous ways including the inability to pay one's debts and becoming a captive in a war effort. It was not unusual to find well educated people or people of former high status among slaves. It was not unusual to find former slave owners who had to exist as slaves. It was not unusual for a person to enter slavery through means we would regard to be unjust. [Slavery in the first century was not a racial institution.] Christians understood that they were to respect rather than run.

[Please note how Jesus was able to do this! He gave the injustices into God's hands while he focused on being righteous. When we focus on our injustices, they consume us. God will care for the injustices if we will focus on being righteous--we cannot do both!]

Jesus endured injustice by placing injustice in God's hands while he focused on being a righteous person in the unjust situation.

Wives, though often considered little more than head slaves, were to be submissive to their husbands. Their principle avenue of influence was their godly behavior. Husbands were to live with their wives with understanding, an understanding that gave wives the respect of fellow heirs in Jesus Christ.

Christian marriages contained people who practiced respect and understanding. A wife converting to Christ while her husband remained an active idol worshipper created unjust situations that exceed most of our imaginations. God through Jesus did not ask first century husbands and wives to do something simple in an unjust society, but to behave in a God-like manner in difficult situations.

Note: nowhere in scripture is a Christian give 'the right' to abuse another person. For a Christian husband to abuse his wife or a Christian wife to abuse her husband is a fundamental denial of Christian principle. If Christian men loved their wives as they loved their own bodies and as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:28, 29) and if Christian wives showed their husbands respect (Ephesians 5:33), most, if not all, abusive situations would disappear in the church. Because this does not happen, abuse has long been rampant in marriages among Christians.

Scripture does not demean women or wives, and neither should men. Nor is the solution to difficult situations the abuse of men. Sadly, too often difficulties in marriages are produced by the previous generation and the childhood experiences of the now married adults.

Peter's summary is striking! In an unjust world and unjust societies, Christians were intended to be a distinctive element in society. They were to maintain a spirit that was harmonious, sympathetic, family in nature, kind from the heart, and humble. What a wonderful community to live in and be a part of! They would be a people who refused to return evil for evil received or

insult for insult received. Instead they returned blessing for injustice. The worthwhile life would not result from control behavior but from godly behavior.

It is difficult for present Christians to believe in the power of Christian influence--it is too slow. In our current society, people want things to happen quickly. In an agricultural society, people realize it takes time for seeds to sprout and grow to maturity. Christian expectation today is focused on 'doing something now,' and is short on patience. We want to sow the seed today and harvest the crop tomorrow.

In Peter's testimony, God's concern for people exceeds human comprehension! God is concerned about idol worshipping kings and governors, about slaves, about wives, about husbands, etc. He is concerned that Christian influence in human society is not disruptive but challenging through example. It is not God's purpose that the people who are His own possession disrupt society but challenge society. Christians do not do this through force, coercion, and control, but through example. It is the manner in which they endure injustice that turns people to God! The lesson: no matter where or in what situation you exist, God cares about you--and everyone you know!

God is concerned about people you and I dismiss.

For Thought and Discussion

1. For what two reasons would Christians be distinctively different?

Christians are different (a) because they understand Jesus Christ is God's living stone and (b) because they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession.

2. The fact that they did not belong to physical existence would be evident in what two ways?

That fact would be evident (a) because they were not controlled by physical desires and (b) because they behaved in ways consistent with who they were in Jesus Christ.

3. Give two reasons that explained why they would be distinctively different.
 - a. *They understood physical desires tried to destroy spiritual existence in Jesus Christ.*
 - b. *They understood godless people could reject them easily if their commitment was inconsistent with their behavior.*
4. What strong image did Peter use?

Peter used the image of war.

5. What would make it simple to slander Christians?

It would be easy to slander Christian if their behavior disrupted society.

6. What would cause those who slandered Christians to see the benefits of following God?

Godly behavior would cause such people to see the benefits of following God.

7. How would Christians NOT cause sweeping social change that transformed human behavior?

It would NOT come through aggressive resistance. It would come through doing right.

8. For whose sake did Peter give his injunctions?

He gave them for the Lord's sake.

9. How would Christians use their freedom?

They would use their freedom as God's slaves.

10. Who would Christians honor?

They would honor all people, including the king.

11. How were Christian slaves to behave?

They were to show submissive respect, even to unreasonable masters.

12. How did Jesus endure injustice in his death?

He placed the injustices in God's hands while he focused on being a righteous person.

13. What 'right' is never given Christians in scripture?

No Christian is ever given 'the right' to abuse another person.

14. Give Peter's summary of Christian behavior in an unjust society.

Christians sought to live in harmony with others in a spirit of sympathy. Among themselves they had a spirit of family relationship. All their kindness came from the heart as they were humble. They did not return evil for evil or insult for insult.

Lesson Six

Living for God in Awkward Times

Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22

One of the troubling questions we ask as American Christians is this: "How can horrible things happen to people who belong to God?" That question takes many forms: "How can bad things happen to good people?" "Why does God refuse to protect His people from the physically undesirable?" "Do bad things occurring to godly people prove that God does not care?" "Does the evidence that God cares concern only preventing undesirable physical things happening to godly people?"

Note that all these questions address some aspect of how the God Who cares about His people allows them to suffer. At the core of the issue is God's sovereignty and power.

Begin by considering Peter's message in today's text. (1) The best way to prevent horrible experiences in physical existence is by doing good. (2) However, there are still people who resent good and cause people devoted to righteousness suffering. If that is your situation, (a) allow only Christ to rule you [be Lord], and make a firm decision that he alone controls you within. (b) When your adversaries cause you suffering, endure adversity in a way that causes them to question you about your sustaining hope. [In context, this statement is about the manner Christians endure suffering with hope, not about a directive for evangelistic knowledge. The focus is on how Christians suffer, not on what they know in evangelistic efforts.] Respond to inquires about your hope with gentleness and respect for the questioner. (3) As you endure your trial, keep a good conscience so your abusers will be shamed by their actions. (4) It is better [if God wills] to suffer for doing right instead of doing wrong. [Remember, God uses suffering to achieve His purposes, including the suffering of His Own son.] (5) Jesus Christ physically died in the understanding that physical existence is not all there is to life. (6) The patient God always has wanted to save people rather than punish them. (7) Baptism is a commitment. (8) The resurrected Jesus is with God, interceding for us.

These points are taken directly from the text, just worded with different words. Peter wrote to Christians who faced opposition because of faith in Christ. The suffering they endured was not that of accident, disease, natural aging, etc. It was caused by the unrighteous opposing the righteous. It was an idolatrous world, and Christianity was (is) incompatible with idolatry.

The first obvious thing is: the suffering (in context) was the result of unrighteous people physically opposing God's people. The second: it served God's purposes for His people to suffer unjustly (it was a powerful evidence of the genuineness of faith in Jesus Christ in an evil society). The third: Christians must decide who controls their lives, and they must be consistent in their conviction through their behavior. The fourth: hope, not threats, leads people to the resurrected Jesus. The fifth: Christians are never alone--the patient God and the resurrected, interceding Jesus are with them.

Christians earnestly need to understand that God's purposes are often best served by the righteous enduring unjust suffering. As in every age, much more is involved than the comfort of the individual. Prophets, martyrs, apostles, godly people, even Jesus suffered physically in the preparation for and the initial introduction of Christianity. Nothing gives evil people more reason

to reflect positively on Christianity than Christians enduring injustice patiently with a godly attitude.

This concept is a difficult one for most American Christians to grasp. Begin with common views. (1) Freedom [for many] means deliverance from suffering's inconvenience. In this society, evil cannot oppose good [in the majority of instances]. (2) In our society, money and power make suffering unnecessary. (3) The material 'good life' is incomplete if it does not include escape from suffering. (4) Suffering and a good life are mutually exclusive. (5) Often, the physical is the ultimate. We want to end suffering NOW. (6) Often we have a poor concept of the eternal as a reality.

Our society has a negative view of suffering. Consider all we do to escape pain. Consider how we regard any pain from any cause as an injustice. We have conquered so many forms of pain we are convinced we should conquer all forms of pain.

Consider physical realities from God's perspective. (1) The war is between God and Satan, not God and humanity. God wants to save humans from Satan's influences, not destroy humans. Humans, not God, invited evil [the conflict between God and Satan] to be part of the physical reality and experience. (2) Evil is the expression of the conflict between God and Satan. Its source is Satan. Though Satan lost his war against God in Jesus' death and resurrection, he through evil seeks to hurt God (Whom he hates) the only way he can--by hurting the people God loves. (3) God's people demonstrate the genuineness of their confidence in God by refusing to allow the vindictiveness of unrighteous people to determine their behavior. (4) The force of the Christians' hope in God triumphs in physical existence by causing unrighteous opponents to marvel at Christians' attitude toward suffering. (5) Christians place supreme confidence in the patient God and the resurrected Jesus.

God looks at human suffering from a different perspective. He sees suffering from a perspective from which people rarely look at it. Suffering documents the reality of faith in God as nothing else can. It is extremely important for us to understand that the war is between God and Satan, not God and humans. The price of victory in any war is blood.

There will be a time when Satan, all advocates of evil, and all forms of evil will be banished. After that moment, Satan will never cause God's people harm again. The only reason God delays that moment is His desire to rescue people from Satan's deceitful control. It is not God's desire that any should perish.

God invested Jesus' suffering in the rescue of humans. He is not about to abandon the people He sought to rescue after investing the blood of His son.

Until that moment, evil will cause the righteous to endure suffering in all societies. To expect to avoid suffering by seeking devotion to God is to be deceived. God WILL help us endure the suffering, but God cannot eliminate suffering (a) without calling for the end and (b) without destroying people who have not yet escaped Satan. Again, God wishes to rescue those people, not destroy them.

The end of suffering can come only with the destruction of those God wishes to rescue.

People are so important to God that He did and does three unfathomable things. First, He endured incredible evil to make preparation to send His son. Second, He sacrificed the life of His son to rescue people. Third, He delays the end of His adversary to create maximum opportunity to rescue people.

Rarely would people consider doing any one of those things.

Paul placed human suffering in perspective with this statement:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18)

Often we are too short sighted to see the blessing.

For Thought and Discussion

1. State the troubling question we ask as American Christians.

How can horrible things happen to people who belong to God?

2. What is the best way to prevent horrible experiences in physical existence?

Prevention is most likely achieved by dedicating oneself to doing good.

3. Will that prevent all horrible experiences? Explain your answer.

No! There always will be some unrighteous people who despise righteous people.

4. What 2 things should Christians do when forced to suffer?

They should allow only Christ to rule them from within. They should endure the injustice in a manner that causes their adversaries to ask what sustains them.

5. What should Christians keep as we endure suffering? Why?

They should keep a good conscience. This will shame the abusers. (Note the abuse occurs, but the abusers are shaken.)

6. What is better?

It is better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong.

7. What is not all of life?

Physical existence is not all of life.

8. From today's text, list 5 things that should be obvious.

- a. *Today's text is about unrighteous people opposing God's people.*
- b. *It serves God's purposes for His people to endure suffering.*
- c. *Christians must decide who controls their lives.*
- d. *Hope, not threats, leads people to the resurrected Jesus.*

- e. *Christians are never alone.*
9. Explain why this is a difficult concept for most American Christians.

We exist to eliminate suffering and injustice. We think it can be eliminated. We place great emphasis on the physical. We have a poor concept of eternity.

10. State 5 realities from God's perspective.
- a. *The war is between God and Satan, not God and humans.*
 - b. *Evil is the expression of Satan's attack on God. Satan is evil's source.*
 - c. *God's people show the genuineness of their faith by refusing to let unrighteous people determine their behavior.*
 - d. *The force of Christian hope triumphs in human suffering.*
 - e. *Christians place supreme confidence in the patient God and the resurrected Jesus.*
11. What will be the result of banishment of Satan, all advocates of evil, and all forms of evil?

Satan will never cause God's people harm again.

12. For God to eliminate physical suffering, what 2 things would be necessary?
- a. *The end must come.*
 - b. *Those who have not escaped Satan's control/influence must be destroyed.*
13. What 3 things did God do to demonstrate how important to Him people are?
- a. *He endured incredible evil to make preparation to send His son.*
 - b. *He sacrificed the life of His son.*
 - c. *He delays the end of His adversary to create maximum opportunity to rescue people.*
14. Read or cite Romans 8:18 to show Paul's perspective on human suffering.

God's eternal blessings will exceed any physical suffering a person endures.

Lesson Seven

Jesus Christ: Our Example

Text: 1 Peter 4:1-6

For a few people, doing something that has never been done before is a challenge. For the majority, such is a major discouragement. For all, there are some distinctions that are undesirable and not worth the effort. Being unique in suffering is undesirable and not worth the effort. Suffering is something to escape, not to endorse.

Healthy people in no society wish to suffer just for the sake of suffering. That appeals to no healthy person. Make a clear distinction between suffering for a reason or a cause and suffering just for the sake of experiencing pain.

People in any age did not glorify suffering for the sake of suffering. Suffering for the sake of heroism is glorified in all ages. To endure suffering to be heroic in championing a cause that is considered (even by some) to be a pursuit of valor is considered admirable. To endure suffering for nothing more than suffering's sake is considered sick.

Healthy people do not view suffering without a reason or a cause as an experience of value.

The call to endure suffering has never been a popular call. That is why calls that involve suffering rarely, if ever, focus attention on the suffering. Instead, the call focuses on the emotionally desirable: the nobility of pursuing God's will, or the patriotism of defending the country, or the defense of those you love, or the joys of freeing the oppressed, or the unjust and horrible characteristics of the enemy. It is understood by most that suffering is an acceptable price to pay for causes more significant than the suffering.

A call that involves suffering seeks (a) to minimize the suffering or (b) to focus the person or the group on something else that (hopefully) makes suffering worthwhile.

Yet, the earliest Christian leaders who thrust Christianity into an idolatrous society were quite frank. Surely it was noble to pursue God's will in Jesus Christ. However, the Christian weapon of advance was suffering, not control. Just as people were attracted to the dead but resurrected Jesus Christ through his selfless suffering, people would be attracted to his eternal journey to the Father by the selfless suffering of God's people. They were quite upfront: if your goal is eternal life with the Father, a willingness to suffer will be your commitment.

Early Christianity was different in that it acknowledged that suffering produced by opposition to Christian existence would be a common experience. It dealt with suffering openly, frankly, and upfront. A part of the price of devotion to God was suffering. Focusing on the eternal in Jesus Christ would result in suffering for many Christians.

How are people encouraged to suffer in the face of certain opposition? Early Christianity did two things. (a) It acknowledged suffering was a certain reality. The forces controlling people's minds and lives saw people who endorsed life in Jesus Christ as enemies. (b) Jesus Christ himself was used as the example of suffering (in addition to Peter's stress in today's text, consider Paul's stress in Philippians 2:5-11 and the book of Hebrews' stress in Hebrews 11).

Note that this approach to the reality to Christian suffering was commonplace in biblical writers. Note Paul and Hebrews use of the same concept in the references given. This would indicate (a) suffering opposition was a widespread problem and (b) this was a common explanation.

Consider today's text. (1) You suffer if necessary because the Jesus of flesh suffered. One benefit of suffering: the route of suffering for Jesus is the escape route from sin. If following Jesus is the superior purpose in your life, then the priorities of sin quickly become inferior. (2) You have lived to gratify the desires of physical existence; now live to seek God's will. Whereas your ultimate values were determined by the gratification of physical desires, live now to with a focus on the eternal. (3) People will note your existence is lived on the basis of different values because you do not exist to gratify the physical. (4) Everyone, regardless of what values determine how they live, is ultimately accountable to God for his/her choices. (5) Verse 6 is a difficult verse for us to understand. It is likely used by Peter as an illustration just as he used the incident with Noah in 3:20. If that observation is correct, it means the original recipients of Peter's writing understood clearly what Peter meant. To them it was a concluding illustration of his point. For us the matter is different. We must reason back from his illustration to understand his point. Three things seem obvious in Peter's illustration. (a) God is incredibly patient. (b) The 'good news' announced through the gospel continues to be 'good news' even in adverse situations. (c) All had opportunity to respond to the patient God's 'good news.'

Please note there was no attempt to evade the reality of suffering created by opposition. The values that direct a Christian's life are distinctly different from the values that guide lives not devoted to God.

You are challenged to focus on the obvious. Jesus has not asked his followers to do something he was unwilling to do. He suffered to do God's will because he focused on God's eternal objective. If following Jesus results in Christian suffering, keep your focus on God and His eternal objective. His eternal objective for Jesus was making him the Christ [Messiah] (see Acts 2:36, 13:30-39), the restoration of His son to his heavenly existence (see John 17:1-5; Acts 2:22-24; 32, 33), and the rule of his son until God's objectives are fulfilled in the physical sphere (see 1 Corinthians 15:25-28).

Instead of spending a lot of time focusing on the difficult and controversial, spend time focusing on the obvious. Emphasize that Jesus' suffering was real, not pretend. He was a physical person--perhaps you can make that point by referring to John 4:4-38 and stressing his weariness, thirst, and hunger. An illustration of how distracted a person can be from physical need can be produced by the person suffering intense grief. Grief often masks physical need. When we are committed to a passionate cause, we often ignore physical need. The fact that Jesus could ignore his physical needs does not mean he did not have them.

Jesus did not wish to experience the suffering involved in physical death (see Matthew 26:37-44). Yet he endured it with resolve to achieve God's eternal purposes. Are you not thankful he did? When he died, no one understood what God was doing but Jesus and God. Even to the twelve, Jesus' death had the feel of defeat! Yet, God achieved His greatest victory and defeated Satan through physical suffering! He made Jesus (his name) the Christ or Messiah by physical suffering. If God could make Jesus the Christ through suffering, do you dare imagine what God can do with your suffering caused by devotion to His will?

Stress two points. (a) Jesus did not wish to die. Do note that after his prayers of yielding, he was a resolved man at peace with his decision. (b) God accomplished what seemed impossible

through physical suffering, and no humans [other than Jesus] knew what God did. We need to understand that when God is at work, suffering in a godly attitude is never useless.

If you are tempted to think, "My yielding to God even in suffering requires faith. Jesus yielding to God in suffering did not require that kind of faith!" then reconsider. Jesus had to trust the faithfulness of God in keeping His promise to raise him from death and restore him to the heavenly realm. Dying meant Jesus placed his total confidence in God--just as we must do!

Discuss the fact that Jesus had to trust God in certain matters just like we must trust God. Note that Jesus had to trust God to resurrect him and restore him. He had never died before!

The Christian trusts God because he/she is devoted to the eternal, not the physical. That devotion will (minimally) result in difficult choices. In those choices (even for the most fortunate), there will be suffering.

Anyone who chooses to serve God incurs the wrath of Satan. Though God's power exceeds Satan's power, Satan is not without power in this physical realm.

The value God places on people is seen in the example He provided Christians in Jesus' physical suffering. God allowed His son to suffer so we could be forgiven!

God's investment in our forgiveness verifies the depth of His caring.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is a common attitude toward suffering?

Suffering is something to escape, not to endure (experience).

2. What do people never enjoy in any age?

They never enjoy suffering for the sake of suffering.

3. The early Christian leaders were quite frank and upfront about suffering. If a person's goal was eternal life with the Father, what would be his/her commitment?

His/her commitment would be a willingness to suffer.

4. What two things did early Christianity do to encourage Christians to suffer?
 - a. *The suffering caused by opposition was acknowledged to be a certain reality.*
 - b. *Jesus Christ was used as the example of suffering in doing God's will.*
5. In today's text, why should Christians endure the suffering created by opposition?

The Jesus of physical flesh suffered.

6. With what focus should Christians live?

They should live with a focus on the eternal.

7. What will people note about Christians and the way they live?

Christians live by a different value system.

8. To whom is everyone accountable for the choices they make?

Everyone is accountable to God for their choices.

9. How did Jesus have to depend on faith in his death?

He had to trust the promises and faithfulness of God to resurrect him and restore him to his place in heaven.

10. Why does a Christian trust God?

He/she is devoted to the eternal, not the physical.

Lesson Eight

The Privilege of Belonging to God

Text: 2 Peter 1:1-4

The objective of this lesson: To increase the Christian's awareness of the privilege God grants us by using us.

To be given the privilege of allowing God to make use of us to achieve His purposes is an enormous privilege. The association of privilege and sacrifice is not foreign to our thought process. In serving the national interest, we often associate privilege and sacrifice. As an example, consider the common attitude when people are called to serve in the military in times of national crisis. Patriotism is expressed in sacrificial service. The values of the life in the nation are worthy of defense. One is honored to sacrifice for the privilege of continuing the existence of the nation.

To begin to grasp God's holiness and His aversion to sin would seem to make it impossible for God to even associate with humanity. To accept God's love for people when humanity is so prone to do evil is beyond incredible. The more people accurately see the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity, the more they behold the privilege of God making use of any person. Only when we begin to grasp how offensive our human evil is to the holy God can we begin to see what a privilege it is for God to make use of us.

A possible distinction in this attitude toward the nation and toward God is that the attitude commonly existing toward the nation exists when the nation is in crisis. The attitude toward God never ends because His conflict with Satan will not reach conclusion until Jesus Christ returns.

The conflict is between God and Satan. It will not end until Christ returns. Until Jesus Christ returns, we are the battleground in this conflict.

Peter begins this letter by referring to himself as Simon Peter. Simon was his name prior to his following Jesus. Peter was the name Jesus gave him (see Matthew 16:17-19).

From the beginning, the author does nothing to magnify himself. He is a servant, not a privileged person.

He did not begin his letter as a privileged person with an elite position before and after Jesus' death and resurrection. Rather, he began with an assurance to others who placed their confidence in the resurrected Jesus. Their faith in Jesus was as important and significant as was the faith held by the twelve. The focus should be on God and Jesus, not on a human. God the Father and Jesus Christ the son made it possible for them to live in divine righteousness, not any person, regardless of what his position with Jesus was. He wrote as a bondservant or slave, as an apostle or one commissioned. He was not the Peter who in the past held a lofty view of his confidence, but the Peter who humbly served.

One of the unique characteristic of Christianity is this: no human mediator is needed for a person of faith in Jesus Christ to approach God--not a prophet, a priest, a preacher, an elder, or any other person. The only intercessors we need as Christians are the Spirit and the resurrected Jesus Christ (Romans 8:26, 34). Every Christian should understand that his or her faith in Jesus

Christ gives him or her access to God--there are no second class Christians who have limited rights to approach the God of promise!

Some endorse and some reject the following view. In this chapter it seems to me that Peter made a distinction between God the Father and Jesus Christ the son. This distinction is not to be seen in the message we receive--it is the same message consistently delivered. To me, the distinction is in the eternal objective and the road to the eternal objective. The objective is to live with God. The means of coming to God is Jesus, who was crowned by God to be the Christ. I suggest you consider Jesus' statement in John 14:6, Peter's statement in Acts 2:36, and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. We want to live with God (as we were created to do), and the way providing that access to God is Jesus Christ. We have never seen God and cannot relate to Him in His eternal character. Jesus lived in our world and provides us an example of how a godly, sinless person lives in the physical realm. We can relate to Jesus because he shared our existence.

If you wish to see a practical illustration of the struggle produced for us by our concepts of the relationship between God and Jesus, listen to the weekly prayers offered in communion. Some are offered to Jesus, and some to God. Difficulty with whom to thank for the sacrifice is often evident. The lack of distinction between what God gave and what Jesus gave is often evident.

It is unlikely that struggle will ever end for us on this earth. The relationship between God the Father and His son is not a relation based on sexual characteristics (maleness). They are not sexual beings. God never sexually fathered a son. Jesus did not experience a birth in the spiritual realm. That analogy is likely used to explain the close relationship between God and the pre-physical Jesus because people live in a sexual world. We do not understand a father and son relationship that has nothing to do with sexual characteristics, nothing to do with physical maleness.

What we can and must understand is that they make our righteousness a reality. We understand that reality is not created by us, but by God through Jesus.

Note the focus is not placed on a human leader, but on the incredible provisions Jesus Christ provided believers. There is no inadequacy in the salvation God made possible through Jesus Christ. Believers are provided everything they need to live a godly life resulting in their salvation. The knowledge is the knowledge of their Savior, not the knowledge of an institution. By no means does this statement demean the church. It merely acknowledges salvation is provided by our Savior. Jesus saves. The saved comprise his church. The church is the "called out." Saved people want to be called out of sin to live for God. Jesus' death and resurrection call us out of sin. The church is people who hear and respond to the call.

Each Christian needs to understand that his or her salvation is 100% adequate. No one in Christ is an inferior Christian who has been saved to an inferior relationship with God. Forgiveness of sins is total for each man or woman in Christ by an act of God. Never forget that one of the biggest criticisms of the human Jesus was that he showed concern for the wrong people. He constantly taught that there were no "wrong people." Salvation is based on need, not on social status.

Many problems would be solved in the church if all Christians understood that the knowledge we have as Christians begins with the Christ, not with the rules and requirements of the

congregation. If knowledge was based on the values of Jesus and not on the values of the congregation, many "issues" quickly would become "non-issues."

There is an urgent need to stop swapping the church for the Savior. Jesus is the Savior. The church is the saved. We place too much faith in ourselves and not enough in Jesus.

It is Jesus who teaches us how to live for God in this world. This statement reminds us of Paul's words in Philippians 3:8-11. In Paul's words, there is no comparison of the righteousness sought by human deeds through keeping rules and regulations and the righteousness God makes available in Jesus Christ. Please remember that we are not talking about the unquestionable importance of obedience, but the focus of obedience.

It is following Jesus who changes who we are. It is the righteousness made possible by Jesus we should seek above all else.

Access to this life of godliness is provided through divine power, not through human achievement or status. They were accustomed to living in a world where even in spiritual matters "power (status) had its privileges." One has access to the most wonderful opportunity of all opportunities by acts of God, not by human achievements or position. This life that leads to existence with God is as certainly available to the least significant people as it is to the most significant people. Anyone is capable of having confidence in and learning from the values of an example. It is who he is and what he has done, not who we are, that calls us to follow him.

God empowers any person through Christ to be His. There is no "privilege" created by human dynasty in a congregation. The issue is not how many preachers my family has had in past generations, or how many elders have been in the family in past generations, or "how much money or land my family has given the congregation," or how many generations of a family has been in a congregation, but how devoted is that immediate person to following Jesus Christ.

The incredible promises are based on who Jesus is, not on who we are without Jesus. It is his promises, not our worthiness, that allow us to share in the divine nature. Peter's emphasis on sharing in the divine nature reminds us of Paul's usage of the concept of a new life in Ephesians 4:20-24 and Colossians 3:1-11.

In Christianity, the less significance a person places on himself or herself, the more significance he or she places on Jesus Christ. Jesus is the force that defines who and what we are. We do not define ourselves.

Take note of the fact that this new life has a responsibility that those who answer Jesus' call to follow him must accept. It is not optional. We seek to escape the force of decay in this physical world. That which decays life even as we live it is the force that focuses us on physical desires rather than on spiritual existence in Jesus Christ. People who follow Jesus Christ will live differently than people who do not follow Jesus Christ. Their values, their personal actions, their interactions with others, and their priorities are different. Sometimes who they are clashes with who society wants them to be. The differences are not artificial or contrived. The differences arise naturally from who they are. Who they are arises naturally from who Jesus Christ is.

We need to realize that there is a force that seeks to destroy our lives while we live them.

Christians often will not be understood by those who do not know God and Jesus Christ. Such people do not understand Christians because they do not understand the values that shape Christians' lives. Christians do not have to produce pretended, artificial differences to be God's "peculiar" people (KJV of Titus 2:14; meaning--a people who belong only to God). They just have to live by Jesus' values. Also, Christians need to be extremely cautious about producing the concept that being in Christ means physical life always pleases us.

We are so precious to God that He invests His reputation in us! The key to making sacrifices in godly living is the awareness of privilege in being in God's family with Jesus Christ. The sense of privilege makes sacrifice acceptable.

God places enormous value on us! He trusts people's concept of Who He is to the way we focus and live our lives as Christians!

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is an enormous privilege?

It is an enormous privilege to let ourselves be used by God for His purposes.

2. Give an example of associating privilege and sacrifice.

The example should be centered in our concept of a standard war fought between opposing forces.

3. Discuss how Peter began this letter.

Peter begins his letter by de-emphasizing his human importance and stressing the importance of every person's faith.

4. In what is the distinction between God and Jesus Christ not seen? In what is it seen?

The distinction is not seen in the message. The distinction is in the eternal objective and the road to that objective.

5. Where is the focus not placed?

The focus is not placed on a human leader.

6. Where is the knowledge focused?

The knowledge is focused on Jesus.

7. Who saves? What do the saved comprise?

Jesus saves. The church is comprised of the saved.

8. What does Jesus teach us?

Jesus teaches us how to live for God in this world.

9. What provides access to godliness?

The divine power provides us access to godliness.

10. What is the new life responsibility?

It is the responsibility to allow Jesus to be our example of how to live. Who we are arises naturally from who Jesus Christ is.

Lesson Nine

Spiritual Growth

Text: 2 Peter 1:5-11

The objective of this lesson: To stress that Christians come to Christ to grow spiritually.

Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is wonderful and significant! To understand (a) the being we call Jesus existed with God prior to becoming a human (Philippians 2:6, 7), (b) he lived as a human in total devotion to God's will and purposes (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49, 50; 14:10; 18:11; Matthew 26:39,42), (c) he died that his blood might atone for human sin (Romans 3:21-26), (d) he was raised to make him Christ and demonstrate God is superior to physical death (Acts 2:24, 36) is truly wonderful! Yet, as wonderful as faith in Jesus is, that faith is only the beginning. Baptism may be the end to an ungodly existence, but it is always the birth (beginning) of a godly existence. Baptism is the green light for a life lived in faith in Jesus Christ, not a stop sign.

Stress that faith is essential, but it is just the beginning of response. Stress that baptism is the culmination of initial response, but is only the beginning of Christian existence.

It is easy to place so much emphasis on evangelism that spiritual growth in Christ is neglected. Both need to be stressed. Every person has the true need to choose between a godless existence and a godly life in Jesus Christ. In the same way, every person who chooses a godly life in Jesus Christ needs to learn how to live that existence, and live it! Stated in another way, only 20 chapters of one book are devoted to evangelism [Acts 1-20 are devoted to the evangelistic activities of two central persons--Peter and Paul. The rest of Paul's statements in Acts are basically defense speeches. I am told evangelistic speeches and defense speeches are obviously different in the original language.] By comparison, there are at least sixteen New Testament books that focus on how Christians individually or as congregations should live and behave. It is as important to mature those brought to Christ as it is to bring people to Christ. It does not achieve God's purposes to fail to bring people to Christ. Nor does it achieve God's purposes to fail to spiritually mature those brought to Christ.

Stress the fact that both evangelism and spiritual development are necessary in Christian existence. It is God's purpose that all people (a) come to Jesus Christ and (b) develop in Jesus Christ. Both are essential to achieving God's purpose.

Immediately after glorifying God for making it possible for humans to be saved and partake of the divine nature, Peter turned to spiritual growth by writing about what we call the Christian graces.

Show from Peter's emphasis that partaking of the divine nature leads immediately to spiritual development. A person does not become a Christian to resist (in himself or herself) spiritual development.

Place your attention on several things. First note that coming to Christ involves a personal commitment to develop as a person who belongs to God. Who you are spiritually when you are baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:26, 27) is not who you will be when you mature in Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is just the foundation for continued spiritual growth.

There will be progressive spiritual development in a person who gives himself or herself to God. The progression of spiritual development will not be the same in everyone (each will develop at a different rate for many reasons), but a person comes to Jesus Christ to spiritually develop. A person has no real reason to commit to Jesus Christ if he or she has no spiritual interest.

Second, note the spiritual development is progressive. Faith in Christ changes your behavior. Changing behavior increases your appetite to know more about Jesus. Increased knowledge of Jesus challenges you to control yourself and to react differently to adversity. This entire process redefines your concepts of God resulting in a desire to fulfill your created objective to be in God's image. The hardest are these: (a) to see all others (regardless of culture or background) who are in Christ as brothers who deserve your kindness, and (b) to love as the God who forgives loves. A person cannot have faith in Christ without changing his or her behavior. That at first is the most obvious change, and the most natural to make. Love (agape) is the most demanding and difficult change to make (see 1 Corinthians 13). This kind of love is not flashy, but it is demanding.

Peter emphasized that spiritual development is progressive. Note that development becomes progressively more difficult as the individual matures in Christ. Early development is the result of acquiring more knowledge. Later development is the result of acquiring increased wisdom. Development never ends in our physical existence because wisdom constantly deepens and expands.

Third, note this development is essential. There is a tendency in some to consider baptism as the ultimate goal. Incredible effort is made to effect a baptism. Minimal effort is made to facilitate spiritual growth and development. Some seemingly assume that if the person of limited insight and understanding is baptized, growth will occur.

Baptism is not the goal but the beginning. Spiritual development does not just happen without interest and effort. Studying the word involves more than swapping or defending personal opinions. There must be a willingness to discover the previously unknown and a willingness to change one's life and understanding. Spiritual development commonly requires much more a discovery than a defense. There must be a willingness to learn the previously unknown without feeling threatened.

Too often, the result is that the baptized person feels he or she can justify any behavior by saying, "I have been baptized." Baptism is not a justification for godless behavior! It is the beginning of godly behavior! Godly behavior does not occur because the person redefines old actions. It occurs because the person changes his or her behavior to be compatible with his or her changed life in Christ.

We are not baptized to justify ourselves, but to develop a deeper, more accurate understanding of God and His will. For most of us, an assumption that we grasp all we need to understand about God and His will does not serve essential development in Christ well.

Consider how Peter emphasized the necessity of spiritual development. If such development does not occur, the person of faith is: (a) useless, (b) unfruitful in his or her knowledge of Jesus Christ, (c) blind or shortsighted, (d) forgetful of his or her purification from evil matters, and (e) prone to tripping.

Stress the negative factors of refusing to develop. It is not a matter of refusing to have faith, but a matter of refusing to allow faith to develop in us.

However, if the person of faith spiritually grows, he or she (a) will be useful to God, (b) will be fruitful in his/her knowledge of Jesus Christ, (c) will have good spiritual sight, (d) understands the personal purpose of purification, (e) is diligent about his/her spiritual calling in Jesus Christ, (f) will never trip, (g) and has reason to be confident about entrance into the eternal kingdom.

Stress the positive factors of promoting personal spiritual development. Contrast the positive factors with the negative factors. It very much is a matter of who I wish to become in Christ. It is much easier to defend a system than it is to promote spiritual growth. Defending a system is impersonal. Promoting spiritual growth is infinitely personal.

Faith is significant, but it is not all of it. Baptism is significant, but it is not all of it. We believe and are baptized to develop!

Stress that the purpose of faith and baptism is the development of spiritual growth.

The privilege of belonging to God increases! God gives us opportunity again to assume the divine nature! Salvation is infinitely possible! Our Lord Jesus Christ provides an "abundant" opportunity to enter the eternal kingdom!

This is Peter's version of "If God is for us, who can be against us" (Romans 8:31-39). Peter shares the possibilities of spiritual development as encouragement.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is what?

It is wonderful and significant.

2. By placing exclusive emphasis on evangelism, what often is neglected?

Spiritual growth in Jesus Christ is often neglected.

3. What needs to be stressed?

Both need to be stressed.

4. How did Peter quickly turn to spiritual growth?

He turned quickly by writing about the Christian graces.

5. What does coming to Christ involve?

It involves a personal commitment to develop as a person who belongs to God.

6. Spiritual development is what?

It is progressive.

7. What is essential?

Spiritual development is essential.

8. What do some Christians assume?

They assume that if a person of limited insight and understanding is baptized, he or she will grow spiritually (as an automatic process--such growth will just happen).

9. How does a baptized person sometimes seek to justify his or her behavior?

They seek to justify ungodly behavior by saying, "I have been baptized."

10. If spiritual development does not occur, what happens to the person of faith?

He/she is useless, unfruitful in knowledge, blind or shortsighted, forgetful of the meaning of purification, and prone to tripping.

11. If spiritual development does occur, what happens to the person of faith?

He/she is useful to God, is fruitful in knowledge, has good spiritual sight, understands purification, is diligent in his/her spiritual calling, never trips, and has reason to be confident about life with God.

12. Faith and baptism are significant, but are not what?

They are not all of it.

13. What opportunity does God give us?

He gives us opportunity to again assume the divine nature.

Lesson Ten

The Importance of Remembering

Text: 2 Peter 1:12-21

The objective of this lesson: to stress the spiritual importance of remembering.

As we age, our "forgetter" works with increasing effectiveness, and our "rememberer" works with decreasing effectiveness! How often do you encounter a subject only to be reminded, "I knew much more about that a few years ago!" How often do you encounter a matter with an emphatic, "I never knew anything about that" only to recall later you knew about the matter sometime in the past. Unfortunately, forgetting gets easier and remembering gets harder.

Discuss how easy it is to forget as we get older.

Spiritually (and in other matters), an important part of wisdom is perspective. An essential part of perspective is remembering. Having experience contributes powerfully to life's lessons if the person remembers. Extreme forgetfulness curses one's life with ignorance. It is as though there were no experiences so there can be no wisdom.

If a person forgets the lessons he or she learned from past experiences, it is impossible for him or her to learn the lessons necessary to develop wisdom. Wisdom is a condition created by learning from the past.

A part of leading people in spiritual development must include reminding. The responsibility of reminding can be quite frustrating to the person leading. There always will need to be a good, effective balance between discovery and recall.

In the American culture, learning increasingly occurs by means other than hearing and recalling. In teaching in the churches of Christ, we rely primarily (especially on the adult level) on hearing and recalling. In our context, it has been said a speaker should never underestimate the ignorance of his audience. When we have so few times to learn and so little time devoted to teaching (four hours maximum in public assembly for most devout people), it is easy for a speaker to devote all of his or her time to discovery and none to remembering.

In today's text, Peter did not resent the need to remind his readers. With his previous emphasis, he reminded them of the privileges God gave them in Christ and their responsibility to spiritually develop. He knew they knew the things he said. As long as he lived, he was determined to remind them in motivating ways. Peter knew he would die soon. That was far more than a personal opinion. It was a revelation from none other than Jesus Christ. He considered stimulating their memory an important thing to do with his limited time.

To many it comes as a shock to realize that an apostle devoted what we consider to be life's most important time to challenging Christians to remember. There is a close bond between spiritual development and remembering.

Why? When he died, he wanted them to remember the matters that he stressed to them. It would be impossible for them to remember Peter and fail to remember the matters that he

stressed. Bottom line, what did he want them to remember? He wanted them to remember the foundation of their faith was not build on fantasy, but on reality.

After he died, he wanted his readers to associate memory of him with the spiritual things that he stressed. He wanted them to know that their faith in Jesus was based on reality, not fantasy. They had confidence in solid truth, not the imagined.

Jesus' identity was confirmed to Peter (with James and John) on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). In the transfiguration, Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah. Moses represented the law which Israel followed. That law served as the core of the Jews' personal and national behavior. Elijah represented the prophets. The prophets commonly made ethical application of the law to people who misinterpreted and misapplied the law. The point: if one wanted to know God's will, listen to Jesus. Jesus was superior to Moses or Elijah (an incredible statement when it was made!) or to what each person represented (an equally incredible statement!). This was not the declaration that Moses or Elijah were without divine authority or were false witnesses. It was the affirmation that Jesus was superior to law or to the past prophetic voice.

Jesus' transformation actually occurred. God actually confirmed his identity. He actually is the fulfillment of the law and of the prophetic emphasis. One can understand God's ethics by understanding Jesus. Jesus truly is the way, the truth, and the life.

Peter's point was simple: This actually happened! God actually affirmed who Jesus was and His pleasure in what Jesus did! This was not some imaginative tale they created to support their message. God actually spoke! They actually understood what God said! God Himself affirmed Jesus' majestic glory! "We heard the voice!"

This was not "preacher talk" or "apostolic imagination." It was fact! Jesus actually is God's son!

It was God affirming the prophetic voice! There could be no doubt concerning Jesus' identity--he was God's son! God himself confirmed that truth! [In the last half of the first century, there was much discussion of Jesus' nature/identity. If Jesus were divine, how did that truth affect his humanity while he was on earth? With their concept of divinity {the physical is evil and the divine is good, the two cannot associate}, many had real difficulty accepting as fact that the divine could be incarnated as the actual physical.] Note in context here, the prophetic voice is associated with God's utterance.

In the late first century there was tremendous disagreement concerning the physical existence of Jesus. Some taught that he appeared to be physical and was not. This was an attempt to separate the "divine" Jesus from the "evil" physical. Have you noted the gospel of John's emphasis on the physical conditions of Jesus--such as John 4:4-8? The gospel of John was likely written in the late first century, perhaps in the early 70s.

God's utterance was not to be confined to God speaking on the Mount of Transfiguration. God spoke through scripture. People (we) do well to heed scripture. Scripture is compared to light shining in our hearts in the darkness occurring just before dawn.

Pay special attention to the "light/darkness" contrast. It was a common contrast with light representing God's certain guidance and darkness representing evil's uncertainty. Read Psalms

119:105-112. The concept is an old one. They had a better grasp than we on the fact that light is essential to life, productivity, and certainty. We are accustomed to turning on a convenient light switch. They depended on the sunrise and used every minute of daylight.

Peter then pointed to a problem occurring in every age. The problem: An individual human saying that God's word means ... Since scripture contains God's voice, the challenge is to listen to God instead of assigning scripture a human meaning. When people wrote scripture, the Holy Spirit was at work in them speaking from God. Since scripture is God speaking, scripture draws its meaning from God, not from a human. It is challenging to study to listen to God rather than making scripture say what we as humans wish so scripture follows or confirms our human agenda.

Too often we hastily speak for God instead of allowing God to speak for Himself. The scripture of the early church was what we know as the Old Testament. It verified the identity of Jesus as the Christ and stressed the importance of living a godly life. What we know as the New Testament was in the process of being written. It was not collected into a single volume for over a hundred years after the close of the first century.

God values humans so much that He (a) sent us His son, (b) confirmed the identity of His son, and (c) continues to speak to us through scripture.

End with an emphasis on God's great love for people.

For Thought and Discussion

1. As we age, what works with increasing effectiveness? With decreasing effectiveness?

Forgetting works with increasing effectiveness; remembering works with decreasing effectiveness.

2. What is an important part of wisdom?

An important part of wisdom is perspective.

3. What is an essential part of perspective?

Remembering is an essential part of perspective.

4. What is the curse of extreme forgetfulness?

The curse of extreme forgetfulness is ignorance.

5. What can be quite frustrating to a person who leads?

The responsibility to remind can be quite frustrating.

6. In today's text, Peter did not resent what?

He did not resent reminding his readers.

7. What was Peter determined to do as long as he lived?

He was determined to remind his readers.

8. What did Peter know?

He knew he would die soon.

9. When Peter died, what did Peter want these readers to remember?

He wanted them to remember their faith was built on reality, not fantasy.

10. In the transfiguration, to whom did Jesus speak?

Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah.

11. Jesus was superior to what two things?

He was superior to the two men and to what they represented--the law and prophecy.

12. What was Peter's point?

His point: the transfiguration actually happened, confirming Jesus' majestic glory by God's voice.

13. There could be no doubt concerning what?

There could be no doubt concerning Jesus' identity.

14. Where else did God speak?

God also spoke through scripture.

15. What problem occurs in every age?

An individual human says what scripture means instead of allowing God to say what he meant.

16. Give three facts that confirm how much God cares for humans.

- a. *God sent us His son.*
- b. *God confirmed the identity of His son.*
- c. *God continues to speak through scripture.*

Lesson Eleven

Evil Discourages

Text: 2 Peter 2

The objective of this lesson: (a) to emphasize evil always opposes those committed to good in service to God; (b) to emphasize those committed to evil will be accountable for the evil they do.

Satan always has had his spokespeople among God's people. Their relationship with Satan is rarely obvious. The effectiveness of their influence is great. Just as there were false prophets among God's people in the past, there will be false teachers among God's people in Christianity. The key to awareness among those who want to be faithful to God is found in recognizing the motives of such people. They will successfully deceive many. They will cause people among and outside of God's people to speak harshly of God's ways.

Call attention to the fact that Peter addressed discouragement among God's people by those who were supposed to be a part of God's people. Satan defines the objectives of such people, not God. They serve agenda's and objectives that are not God's agendas or objectives. They are physically focused, not spiritually focused.

Some of the most discouraging, severe opposition Christians will endure are caused by men and women in the Christian community. There always have been those who pretended to speak for God who were concerned for themselves, not God.

The primary dividing line between a false teacher and a teacher of truth is the motive(s) of the person. An effective deceiver tells people what they want to hear.

The fact that wicked people existed among Christians should not come as a surprise to Peter's readers. In the ages when men wrote because God's Spirit moved them (2 Peter 1:19-21), there were false prophets (2 Peter 2:1). Also in the age when God has revealed Jesus as His own son and the Christ, there will be false teachers.

God always has been opposed by those who have reason to be grateful to Him--from the time of the Garden of Eden!

Those people in Peter's day introduced destructive teachings that denied Jesus. They were described as sensual people (those who existed for the physical "here and now") who were greedy (slick talkers who easily deceived). Of such people, Peter said they brought swift destruction on themselves, caused the truth to be maligned, exploited, and faced certain destruction. God is aware of what they do and why (their destruction is not ignored).

The people Peter spoke of denied the divinity of Jesus and denied he was the way to God. They focused on things that gratified physical desires, not the eternal. The result: they were sensual and greedy. While such is easy to do today, it was even easier to do in Peter's lifetime. Then, forms of idolatry emphasized the sensual with the divine (temple prostitutes sometimes were a reality in fertility cults) and greed was a "good thing" since idolatry often equaled power and prosperity. Then, as now, many thought having what you wanted was the best of the divine and the physical.

Three examples are used of God's awareness and power. The first focused on the fact that God did not spare those who persisted in wickedness. The second focused on the fact that God persisted in extending opportunity even as preparation for divine wrath continued. The third focused on the fact that God could rescue the righteous at the same moment He administered accountability to the evil.

God is no idiot! His great love for people does not blind Him to evil acts! He knows who is trying and penitent and who is not! Because He is patient and forgiving does not mean He has no anger, no limits. People do not determine God's limits, but He has them. The examples show both God's awareness and His patience.

In the first example, Peter declared God did not spare angels that sinned. God brought an end to their sinful activities. He also imprisoned them to hold them until their judgment. Peter does not mention what angels he spoke about or what their sinfulness was.

Peter evidently knew much more about this than we do. Just as humans rebel against God, beings who exist in the divine sphere rebelled against God. God was aware of that rebellion and dealt with it decisively.

The second example is a reference to the flood. In the ancient world, God saved Noah and his family while God destroyed the wicked. However, God used Noah as a proclaimer of righteousness even as Noah prepared for the flood.

If you wish to refresh your memory of the flood incident, read Genesis 6-8. God through Noah both proclaimed and prepared for the flood. Stress that God can both preserve and hold accountable at the same time. Stress that God provided opportunity to repent even as He prepared for destruction.

The third example was that of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this example, God both destroyed and rescued. He destroyed by reducing the cities of the wicked to ashes. He rescued Lot who was continually frustrated by the lawlessness of those people. While Lot was a mixture of both good and bad characteristics (as are most of us), Peter stressed Lot's good characteristics.

If you wish to refresh your memory of the events of Sodom and Gomorrah, read Genesis 18:16 through chapter 19. Peter focused on Lot's good qualities and stressed again that God knows how to rescue and hold accountable at the same time.

Peter's emphasis on the wicked is on their physically indulgent nature. They respect nothing but their own desires. They reduce themselves to the level of dangerous animals who think of nothing but what they want. They literally are ruled by their physical desires. They delight in deceiving the unstable to satisfy their physical wants. They view others as opportunities to satisfy themselves. They have no idea of how blind they are to the enslavement of their own passions.

The examples exist to stress two facts about God. God knows how (a) to rescue the godly from trials and (b) to keep the unrighteous under punishment (accountable for their wickedness) until the judgment day. The examples exist as a warning to those who are tempted to live ungodly lives and as an encouragement to those who live godly lives.

Stress the fact that GOD KNOWS HOW. It has been a great conclusion that God can be deceived (see Galatians 6:7-10). He or she who seeks to deceive God deceives only himself or herself. (See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.) While distinguishing between the sincere and the insincere is often a problem for us, it is never a problem for God.

The particular people Peter spoke of were what we might refer to as "out of control" people. Peter describes the people as daring (afraid of nothing), selfish, and disrespectful of everything. He compares them to unthinking animals who are suitable only for capture and death. They are people who act in ignorance, who rejoice in things that should make them ashamed, who focus only on physical pleasure, and who are captivated by greed.

Again, stress that Peter targets those who are physically indulgent--people who are slaves to their own passions and respectful of nothing.

Peter described such people in these ways: (1) They are like Balaam--so filled with greed they would listen to a donkey without realizing the donkey is talking. (2) They are springs without water, stormy mists. (3) They are arrogant, vain people who exist only for sensual satisfaction. (4) They promise freedom but only give slavery.

One of the truly funny episodes in scripture is Balaam talking to his donkey as if his donkey were a man! Anger combined with greed truly blinds people! (See Numbers 22.)

These people seem to offer relief from an oppressive situation, but they are like clouds with no water or dried up springs which the thirsty traveler anticipated.

They are all words and no action. They sound good, but produce nothing.

They are slaves promising freedom. Everyone is a slave to that which is bigger than he or she is!

Please note these people were Christians! They would have been better off if they had never escaped evil defilement through Jesus Christ than to become again entangled and overcome by those defilements. Knowing Jesus Christ resulted in them being worse people! Peter compares them to dogs eating their own vomit (that which made them sick becomes the food) and cleaned sows returning to the mud hole (that which made them filthy becomes their pleasure). They value more what they were without Jesus Christ than what they could be with Jesus Christ.

The people Peter spoke of had escaped from defilement through Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, these people were again tangled up in that which they escaped, and did not escape a second time. The contempt God feels for people who so abuse what He did in Jesus Christ is enormous--they would have been less punished if they had never known Christ--see Hebrews 6:4-8; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Their desire is to return to what they left even though it was part of their sickness or their filth.

The value God places on people is seen in two things: (1) Even when people became extremely wicked, God gave them opportunity to repent. Humans rarely, if ever, give any consideration to those who frustrate them to the core! (2) Even when the overwhelming majority were wicked, God rescued the righteous minority. God knows how to rescue and punish at the same moment!

God values people so much that He does not give up on them easily.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What has Satan always had?

Satan has always had spokesmen among God's people.

2. In the past, who were these people? Among Christians, who are these people?

In the past, they were false prophets. Since the beginning of Christianity, they are false teachers.

3. What key awareness do godly people have to maintain?

They must maintain a key awareness of those people's motives.

4. What did those false people do in Peter's day?

They introduced destructive teachings that denied Jesus.

5. Peter used three examples of God's awareness and power. What was Peter's first example?

God did not spare angels who sinned.

6. What was Peter's second example?

The second example was centered in the flood.

7. What was Peter's third example?

The third example centered in Sodom and Gomorrah.

8. What two things did Peter's examples stress about God?

God knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and God knows how to keep the unrighteous under punishment.

9. How does Peter describe the "out of control" people?

He describes them as daring, selfish, and disrespectful of everything.

10. To what does Peter compare these people?

Peter compares them to unthinking animals suitable only for capture and death.

11. In what four ways does Peter describe these people? (What comparisons does he make?)

- a. *As Balaam.*
- b. *As springs without water or stormy mists.*
- c. *As arrogant, vain people who exist only for sensual pleasure.*
- d. *As slaves who promise freedom.*

12. These Christians would be better off if they had what?

They would have been better off if they had never escaped defilement through Jesus Christ.

13. What effect did knowing Jesus Christ have on them?

They were worse people.

14. What comparison did Peter make to dogs and sows?

They were like a dog that ate his own vomit and a clean sow that went back to her mud hole.

15. In what two things is the value God places on people seen?

- a. *God gave the extremely wicked opportunity to repent.*
- b. *He rescued the righteous minority.*

Lesson Twelve

A Christian's Discouragement

Text: 2 Peter 3:1-7

The objective of this lesson: (1) To stress the fact that in every age Christians should expect discouragement. (2) Some of the most disheartening discouragement will come from other Christians.

I have been encouraging and providing people insights for fifty plus years. When people talk with me the first time, I often fail to ask them an important question: "What are you expecting?" Like many of you, I find a primary fact true: What people expect determines (a) how they listen and (b) their attitude. When a person's expectations are misfocused, his or her reactions frequently result in some form of personal discouragement.

Use an example of Christian discouragement that comes from personal experience or accurate personal knowledge. Be certain not to embarrass another person.

Many first century Christians falsely expected Jesus Christ to return quickly (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2). In this Thessalonians' statement, Paul indicated spirits, messages, and writings declared Jesus Christ's return had already occurred. Even John in Revelation depicted souls of martyrs under a heavenly altar asking God why He is waiting to avenge their deaths (Revelation 6:9-11).

In the first century as Christianity established itself as a viable choice/lifestyle, Satan's opposition was fierce. There were serious attacks on the core of Christianity--such as attacks on Jesus' resurrection or return.

The questions, "Has Jesus Christ already returned?" or "Why is God waiting so long to send Jesus Christ back?" are almost as old as the beginning of Christianity. (Paul's answer was, "Not until ... [2 Thessalonians 2:3]. Peter's answer is found in his statement: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" [2 Peter 3:9]). God's investment in our salvation is enormous! He even wants the rebellious and wicked to repent! Consider the parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the disloyal steward (Luke 16:1-13), and the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15). Obviously, God does not look at situations as we do.

If Jesus' return could be successfully attacked, there was no reason to trust anything Jesus said. Please note the responses focused (1) on God's nature and (2) God's value system. Christians make a huge mistake when they assume God is some form of "super human" and that God's values are human values rather than divine values.

In every age, those who dare to be Christians encounter opposition--even in the first century! Spiritual discouragement is not unique to 21st century Christians! Even some of the first Christians were so discouraged they longed for relief! Peter wrote to discouraged Christians! His second writing was to stir their memory.

A serious mistake is made when Christians decide everything will be fine for them physically because they belong to God in Christ. If Christians think all will be exactly as they wish

physically because God is superior to Satan, they open a major avenue into their lives to temptation. In the physical world there is evil. In the spiritual world to come evil will not be existent. God will eliminate the existence of evil through judgment. As long as we live in this physical world, we will experience opposition and discouragement just as did the physical Jesus (consider such scriptures as Matthew 26:37, 38; John 11:33; 13:21). We seek a place where those who live by faith belong in the awareness that place will never be in our physical world (consider Hebrews 11:13-16).

An important part of countering discouragement was remembering. Remembering what? (1) Remembering God's plans were confirmed by the prophets (the writers of what we call the Old Testament--which was the scripture that most first century Christians used). (2) Remembering Jesus Christ's commandments declared through the apostles.

Christians do not regret what they left. They regret that those who follow God live in the discouragement of this physical existence. They remember physical existence always has discouraged people who follow God. Physical existence is not a friend to people who live by faith.

Peter wanted his readers to know discouragement was to be expected. There would be Christians who lived to satisfy their physical desires. There would be Christians asking questions calculated to discourage believers: "Why has Jesus Christ not come back? (Has he abandoned you? Does he not keep his promises?) Everything is just the same--the world has not changed! (Should things not be different because of Jesus' influence and teachings?)"

Discouragement always will find a way to attack the faith of believers. The tactics of discouragement are too numerous to list. It seeks to attack your reason for continuing to place faith in Jesus Christ, your reason for persistently being a person who lives by faith in Jesus Christ, or making you regret the prices you must pay to continue to let your faith in Christ be the core of your life.

Peter said these discouragers did not consider everything. I presume Peter's context from the end of chapter 2 continues. When Christians are the source of discouragement to Christians, the impact of the discouragement increases! The discouragers did not consider the fact that God destroyed the world by water. God proved He can destroy His creation! God's warning that a destruction of this world by fire is coming must be taken seriously. Ungodliness will not prevail!

Countering discouragement in Christian existence ultimately depends on the Christian's understanding of God. In Peter's situation, he urged Christians to realize that God's destruction of that which he made was continuing evidence of God's willingness to destroy His creation again in order to destroy evil. God despises evil! Godlessness has perverted all God made! God will not allow godlessness to use His creation indefinitely! Consider Paul's statement in Romans 8:18-25.

The concept of "kept for the day of judgment" is a reoccurring theme in 2 Peter. The same concept is used in regard to wicked angels (2:4); in regard to the unrighteous (2:9); and possibly in regard to discouraging Christians speaking empty promises (2:17, 19).

No matter how things look at any moment, ultimately God will not permit ungodliness to have victory over godliness. God knows how to bring ungodliness into judgment. Judgment is inescapable for the ungodly!

Just as God revealed Jesus on earth as Savior (1:16-18), God will reveal Jesus to earth again in preparation for the judgment (3:7 in its context). The ungodly Christians who advance their lustful desires and discourage those who place their confidence in Christ will be held accountable for their destructive acts and attitudes.

The resurrected Jesus is Lord now (Acts 2:36) and will continue as Lord until all God's enemies (including death) are defeated (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

In every age there are people who exploit God's grace expressed in kind forgiveness. There is a vast difference between depending on God's grace and attempting to exploit God's grace to advance physical desires. When anyone depends on God's grace, he or she (1) believes Jesus came from God, (2) believes Jesus came to earth to do God's will, (3) believes Jesus is a human's access to God, (4) trusts God's accomplishments in Jesus' death (atonement for our sins; redemption from our wickedness; the power of permanent forgiveness), (5) trusts God's accomplishments in Jesus' resurrection (the total defeat of death seen (a) in God's power to restore life after death occurs, and (b) in the power to sustain the new existence), and (6) believes access to this new existence is available to everyone who places his or her confidence in God through Jesus Christ. That dependence expresses itself in obedient commitment to a lifestyle defined by God and consistent with God's character.

A person exploits grace when he/she seeks to justify an indulgence of physical desires rather than repent. A person depends on God's grace when he/she seeks godly existence through the redirection of life which involves repentance. The person who believes he/she can justify physical indulgence and maintain access to God's grace deceives only himself/herself. He/she who places trust in God's accomplishments in Jesus' death and resurrection instead of his/her accomplishments maintains access to God's grace.

Seeking to exploit God's grace is a conscious effort (1) to demean God, (2) to take advantage of the faith of those who trust God, (3) or both. In one of numerous ways, it is the deliberate attempt to have God's kind blessings while justifying living for physical indulgence or/and physical ambitions. It claims to belong to God while living for one's own godless agenda. Such existence specializes in deception. God holds such people in contempt.

To conclude a person can live by indulging his/her physical desires and remain in God's kindness and goodness involves the impossible attempt to deceive God. God is offended that such a person has such a low view of Him and that a person believes he/she can take advantage of Him. God has no respect for the person who has no respect for Him--even if the person claims to follow Him!

Because God values people, never think you can deceive God.

The fact that God is incredibly kind does not mean God is gullible!

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss how expectations affect a person's anticipations.

This discussion should include this truth: a person's expectations commonly form the foundation of his/her anticipations. I often expect from you what I want. The more my focus is on me, the less I notice you.

2. Discuss common expectations in the first century concerning Jesus Christ's return.

This discussion should include their common expectation that (1) Jesus had come or (2) would come shortly. Consider 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5. Either conviction could cause them grief, anxiety, or irresponsible behavior.

3. Discuss the fact that those who dare to be Christians in all ages can expect opposition.

This discussion should include the fact that good from God and evil from Satan will always be in opposition.

4. Discuss the fact that discouraging people are to be expected.

This discussion should focus on the fact that there have always been false prophets.

5. Discuss the concept of "kept for the day of judgment."

This discussion should include the fact the God knows how to keep His opponents for judgment. Judgment is more a matter of sentencing than determining one's guilt or innocence. Opponents of God will be eternally accountable for their choices. Those in Christ are forgiven.

6. Discuss who the person is who depends on God's grace.

This discussion should include the understanding that the person who depends on God's grace trusts His accomplishments in Jesus' death and resurrection rather than his/her accomplishments in service and obedience. The one who trusts God's grace:

- a. *Believes Jesus came from God.*
- b. *Believes Jesus came to this world to do God's will.*
- c. *Believes Jesus is our access to God.*
- d. *Trusts God's atonement for our sins, redemption from our wickedness, power of permanent forgiveness.*
- e. *Trusts God's total defeat of death in Jesus' resurrection.*
- f. *Believes everyone has access to new existence by placing confidence in God through Jesus Christ.*

7. Discuss who the person is who seeks to exploit God's grace.

This discussion should include an understanding that such a person seeks to take advantage of God's kindness and goodness by justifying his/her own physical desires.

8. Discuss people who think they can deceive God.

This discussion should include the awareness that such people mistake God's kindness and goodness for gullibility. Consider Galatians 6:7, 8.

Lesson Thirteen

A Christian's Need For Patience

Text: 2 Peter 3:8-13

The objective of this lesson: to stress God's timeless patience as it contrasts to human time-focused impatience.

In our text, Peter began by emphasizing a key difference between humans and God: humans are creatures dependent on time, and God is not. Humans have a beginning and an end. They celebrate their beginnings (birthdays) and dread their physical ends (deaths). Everything in their physical world they know has a beginning and an end. Everything physical is temporary. The "time" between beginning and end may vary, but everything physical has a beginning and an end. This is such a common reality in physical existence that it is difficult for humans to think of anything in terms of not having a beginning or end.

Make certain your class understands that we humans depend on time, but God is not dependent on time.

The one reality humans know that has no beginning or end is God. God is very different from humans in comparison of the divine to humanity because time is without significance to God. God is not subject to time. One of God's greatest promises to us humans is the promise to give us an existence that is not dependent on time.

God is the only reality Christians know Who is not dependent on time.

While we humans use time to measure the reality of promises, God does not. "Quickly" and "soon" have significance to humans because they are concepts concerned with time. While they are terms concerned with the human measurement of time, they are not terms that are significant to God.

God's purposes are not time dependent. The passing of time in the human context does not mean God's promises are less likely to occur. Time is not a measurement that can be used to determine God's commitment to His purposes.

To humans, especially to us American humans, we want occurrences we regard as significant to take place in our lifetimes. Whereas God is patient, we tend not to be patient. With God, purpose (instead of time) is the key consideration. The issue with God is never, "Is this taking too long?" The issue with God is, "Has My purpose happened?"

Because humans tend to associate their lifetimes and their desires with important things they want to occur in that time frame, people tend to associate time with reality. Though people tend to understand that things continue to happen when reflecting on the past, they tend not to think of things continuing to happen when reflecting on the future. Often, the future is just going to be an extended version of now. God declares because something has not already happened (such as the eternal judgment) does not mean it will not happen. Jesus Christ will return, but his return will not be determined by time.

We humans should be happy God is unconcerned with time. Who knows for certain "how long" it took for God to find Abraham? For us humans, the important thing is that the patient God waited until such a man existed. It took generations to produce the nation of Israel. It took about 2000 years to produce the Christ from Abraham and Israel. Life with God after our deaths will not be a timed event.

Humans tend to look at God's freedom from time restraints in negative terms. Humans need to understand the lack of time restraints on God is a good thing for us.

While God is not a God constrained by time, He is a God who is extremely patient as He pursues His purposes. After He invested enormously in our salvation (read Romans 5:6-11), He is not about to abandon His purposes. If a portion of humanity chooses not to live at peace with God, it will not be God's fault. He patiently pursues peace with all people. If there is no peace with God, it will be the choice of those who reject His peace!

God's patience is not time-dependent. God's patience is purpose-dependent. While to us the possible and impossible is often time-dependent, with God the possible and impossible is never time-dependent.

Consider the flow of Peter's argument. (1) Time is not a consideration to God. Therefore, humans should not use time to gauge God's commitment to His promises. God's promises always spring forth from God's commitments. God's greatest commitment in the God to human relationship is to human redemption/salvation. God does not succeed in His purpose when people perish. God succeeds when people repent. God is patient to allow maximum human repentance. He is not hesitant to keep His promise. It is not a matter of time. It is a matter of divine commitment to divine purpose. (2) When God's judgment does come, it will be sudden and unexpected. It will be totally unexpected--no human will predict it. It will be noisy and inescapable. [The concepts associated with the end of the physical as humans know it is not Peter's primary point. Is Peter affirming something they do not know? Is he referring to a commonly held concept? Is he merely capitalizing on a widely held view in the Christian community? Two facts must be understood: (a) this is a difficult passage to translate; (b) the nature of the coming of the end is not Peter's basic point.]

Two things need to be stressed. (1) God's work is always divine purpose in focus, never time-dependent. (2) God's work in bringing His purpose to pass is not regulated by human desire or human restrictions.

Peter was not denying the fact that the unexpected judgment will come. He is affirming the end of the physical as humans know it is certain to come. That certainty underscores his point: since the judgment will happen, what kind of people should we be? The certainty of the judgment must encourage a Christian's commitment to a holy lifestyle founded on godly conduct.

The coming of the judgment is a fact. When judgment will occur will not be determined by time. (1) Recognizing judgment as a fact, and (2) recognizing our lives will endure judgment, you should be encouraged to realize the importance of investing yourselves in a righteous lifestyle. Peter's objective is NOT to scare them into a godly existence, but his objective is to show them that a godly existence "makes sense." His argument: "Since you know judgment will happen, is it not wise to live righteously?" Or, "You are more than temporary. Why live as though you are temporary?"

Christians do not feel threatened by the end of the physical as they know it. The end of the physical means the coming of a world in which they belong. This physical world constantly reminded the Christians to whom Peter wrote that they did not belong to (fit in) this world of physical habitation. Their values and priorities were in such contrast with people who did not know God (the majority) that Christians were obviously misfits in a world that neither respected nor wanted them. The world that existed after the judgment would be a world designed for the righteous. [The new world would be what God designed this world to be when He made it.] People who are committed to righteousness in this world in which they do not belong would "fit in" or "belong to" the world to come. The righteous in this world will be proper inhabitants for the world of righteousness that is to come.

A righteous lifestyle will not "fit in" or "belong to" a world unconcerned with righteousness. Righteous people will constantly seek to be God's influence in this world, but they will never "fit" in this world and its priorities. God will produce a world in which the righteous belong and fit.

The objective is NOT to make Christianity incorporate the values and priorities of a godless existence as was the situation discussed in chapter 2. The objective IS to encourage Christians to be true to righteous values and priorities. These are the values and priorities that will make the world of righteousness their world.

There is the constant temptation to compromise the values and priorities of righteousness with the values and priorities of an unrighteous world. At times, it seems the objectives of this physical life are best suited to fulfill the purposes of human existence. There is the constant pressure to seek to combine the objectives of unrighteousness with the objectives of righteousness.

Stress that Peter wrote to Christians about their struggles and temptations. The letter of 2 Peter is focused on Christian life, not the conversion of people who are not Christians.

The emphasis on the importance of people to God is seen in God's commitment to our redemption (verse 9). Christians are not committed to God because they are terrified of Him. They are committed to God because He is on their side! [See Paul's encouragement in Romans 8:31.] God takes no delight in people perishing. God takes delight in people repenting. Christians belong to the God who wants to save, not destroy. He knows how to rescue! He knows how to give the righteous a world in which they belong!

God wants repentance! Destruction is unnecessary! Destruction among Christians is necessary only if they abandon a righteous existence to return to an unrighteous lifestyle.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Peter begin our text?

Peter began our text by emphasizing that time considerations are a key difference between humans and God.

2. What is the one reality we know that has no beginning or end?

The one reality we know that has neither beginning nor end is God.

3. How do humans measure the reality of promises?

Humans use time to measure the reality of promises.

4. When do we want significant happenings to occur?

We want occurrences we consider significant to take place in our lifetimes.

5. Why should we be happy that God is unconcerned with time?

God's commitment to His purposes that bless us are not restrained by time considerations.

6. Though God is unconcerned with time, He is still what? In what does He have an enormous investment?

God is extremely patient. He has invested enormously in our salvation.

7. In the flow of Peter's reasoning, what is his first point? What is his second point?

a. *God is not concerned with time.*

b. *When God's judgment comes, that judgment will be a sudden, unexpected occurrence.*

8. What was Peter's over-all point?

Peter's over-all point: Since the reality of judgment is certain, would it not be wise to live a life of righteous existence?

9. Do Christians feel threatened by the end of the physical world as we know it? Why?

No, the end of the physical world does not threaten Christians. The end of this world means the coming of a world in which the righteous belong.

10. Where is the importance of people to God to be seen in this text? Explain your answer.

In this text, the importance of people to God is in verse 9, in God's commitment to human redemption. God is the champion of the righteous. He seeks our repentance. He knows how to rescue. He knows how to give the righteous a world in which they belong.