

Bible Study Forum over 1 Peter 2 (2/2)

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The text assigned for today is I Peter 2:9-10. It is the continuation of the text we studied the day before yesterday:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,
in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness
into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Yesterday's text took one central image, that of a stone building, and developed it. This text seems to carry the idea of a building one step further: it no longer speaks of a building. What it does is that it takes a series of metaphors, and builds one on top of the other, as if those metaphors themselves were stones in a building. Indeed, in the very first words of v. 9 we have **four** such building blocks.

You are:

a chosen race
a royal priesthood
a holy nation,
God's own people.

These four images are introduced by the short conjunction, "but." Remember that in the earlier part of the passage we were reading about a stone that had been rejected. Remember also that throughout the entire Epistle we are reading words addressed at a people whom the world rejects. They are "the exiles of the Dispersion," people under suspicion, under constant threat of

persecution, being tested as gold is purified by fire. In other words, people that did not have much reason to think very highly of themselves.

To these people, after speaking of the rejection of the master builders, the Epistle now says: **But you** are a chosen race.

These are words that need some explanation, for the phrase “chosen race” has a very negative and tragic history. People who consider themselves a chosen race have done and continue doing much evil to those whom they have considered inferiors. The phrase “chosen race” has the stink of Auschwitz, and ethnic cleansing, and lynchings right here in Georgia.

It is therefore very important to clarify what I Peter means by “chosen race.” And this we can do by highlighting three differences between what I Peter means by chosen race and what the Nazis, for instance, mean by the same words.

The first difference has to do with the meaning of the word “race.” This goes back to the earlier part of the epistle, which speaks of Christians as being born anew. In 1:23, we read: “You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed.” We usually think of a “race” as a group of people with some common genes. The “chosenness” which all those supposedly superior races claim for themselves, and on the basis of which they commit their atrocities, has to do with genes transmitted from parent to child. But that is not at all what “race” means here.

The “chosenness” of which I Peter speaks has nothing to do with genes. It has nothing to do with who your physical parents or ancestry were. It has nothing to do with the color of your skin or the shape of your face. It has to do with the new birth in Jesus Christ, through the hearing of the Word and it is open to all humankind as a divine gift.

The second difference has to do with what I Peter means by “chosen.” When we are chosen for something, it is usually on the basis of some asset we have, some reason that makes us special. That is normal. I would hope that the reason why the committee planning this event chose me to do this Bible study is because they thought I could do it. And I imagine the reason why you chose whatever you are wearing this morning is because you thought it was appropriate and attractive. (Although, as I look around the room, I am not so sure!)

But what I Peter is telling its readers is that they are chosen, not because of who they were, or what they had done, or what they could do. They were a bunch of nobodies chosen by God’s sheer grace. The word “chosen” appears already in the very first verse of the Epistle, which is addressed “to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God....” The word which the NRSV translates as “exiles” can also be translated as “houseless” or “homeless.” Most likely it does not mean that these people are “homeless” in the sense in which we use the term today, that they have no place to sleep. But it does mean that these people are rootless, that they have no place in the society in which they live, that they are alien to the structures and the contacts by which society gives

status and provides an emotional home to people. These are the “nobodies” of Pontus, Galacia, Cappadocia, etc. And these nobodies have been chosen.

(Remember what we saw in Wednesday’s text, that Jesus is the stone which the master builders rejected, but which has now become the cornerstone. And, had we had more time, it would have been interesting to consider also how in that passage Christians are told that they are being build into a “spiritual house” — they who in the first verse of the Epistle were called “houseless.”)

So, the reason why Christians are a chosen race has nothing to do with anything specially worthy about us, but is rather the result of the sheer grace of God, who chooses what would otherwise have been rejected.

The third difference between I Peter's usage of “chosen race” and its common usage in the secular world has to do with what comes later in the text, and therefore we’ll postpone it for a while.

The next image which I Peter uses is a royal priesthood. In a way, the word “royal” here is parallel to the word “chosen” in the previous image. These people were nobody, and yet they are royal!

In order to understand the import of all this, it is important to understand how people in that society understood status. Status was a necessary consideration in all social, and even commercial transactions. People related to one another according to the relative status of each of the two parties. And status was determined by a series of considerations, of which the most important were birth, wealth, and connections. To have certain position of authority, you had to be born into certain families, and be able to claim certain ancestors. This was true in Rome itself, and was also true of the areas in Asia Minor to which this Epistle was addressed, for when Rome added a new province or city to its empire it acknowledged the ancient aristocracies of each place. But birth was not enough. In Rome, no matter what your name and family were, you could not be a senator unless you had a certain level of wealth. And the same was true of the next level down, the equestrians. In places such as Pontus, Galatia, and the rest of the places where this letter was sent, people of high birth had no status unless they had the money to pay for great public works, and to provide lavish festivals for the population. And connections were also important. If you were not of noble birth, nor rich, you certainly had connections. In every society people have connections. And in this society, connections defined your status. Even if you were a slave, it made a difference whose slave you were.

Most likely, the vast majority of Christians in Asia Minor had no claim to illustrious birth, no great wealth to call their own, and very few connections of any significance—and, if they had any such connections, they would be sorely weakened by having accepted this new and strange faith.

But I Peter tells them that they have a greater birth than even the most illustrious. They are “born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed.” And they have wealth, for their faith is “more precious than gold,” and their inheritance is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” And now, to top it all, this passage tells them that they have connections. They are even royalty! : “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.”

Obviously, what makes them royal is their adoption as children of God. There are scholars who believe that I Peter is essentially a baptismal sermon, providing instruction as to what baptism means, and as to how the baptized are to live. That may or may not be the case. But no matter what, it is clear that what I Peter is saying is that, by being brought into this spiritual house which God is building, by being joined with God through Christ and through a new birth, Christians have a new status all of their own: they are royal children of God!

In this regard, it may be interesting to note that in the early church it was customary to kneel and bow your head at prayer every day, except Sunday. Sunday is the day of the victory of Jesus over the forces of death. Sunday is the day when we remember and celebrate the fact that, through that victory, we have been adopted as children of the Most High. We are still not living in a royal palace. We are still pilgrims and exiles. And during six days of the week we remember that. But Sunday is the day of victory and adoption, the day when we approach God as heirs and royal children approach the throne: looking God in the eye and with a sense of victory and trust!

Time has gone by, and we now have difficulty understanding the impact that a letter such as I Peter must have had on its first readers. It took some three or four centuries, but eventually Christians were accepted by society at large; and the day soon came when it was expected that everyone who was anybody would be a Christian. (Along these lines, it is interesting to note that the word “pagan,” which is now given to the ancient religions of the Mediterranean, originally meant “peasant” or “rustic.” What happened was that, as Christianity became the dominant religion, the old gods continued living only in the deep countryside, and thus the ancient religion was dubbed “pagan,” that is, the religion of ignorant bumpkins who supposedly knew no better. This was a far cry from the situation when I Peter was written, when the rustics, the nobodies, were the Christians, and those who held to the old religion were the senators, the nobility, the powerful, the educated.)

In such circumstances, it is difficult for us to understand—really to understand—the impact of I Peter and its message on people who had no status or standing in their society.

Perhaps a story will help. It is a story told by a Latin American priest who began meeting with groups of peasants to study and discuss the Bible. He tells that in one of these groups there was an elderly man who sat at the back and was very quiet. At one point, after reading a passage from Scripture, the priest turned to this man and asked him: “What do you think about this?” There was a long silence. The man did not answer, but tears came to his eyes. The priest was afraid that he had embarrassed the man, and began to apologize. But the old man interrupted

him: “You do not need to apologize. It is just that this is the first time in my life that anyone has asked me for my opinion.” The priest was so taken aback that all he could say was “But you are a son of God!” To which the old man replied with a smile whose radiance the priest had never seen before.

The nobody becomes somebody, and that is part of the good news of the Gospel!

[**Discussion:** If I Peter is addressed to people who had every reason for a low self esteem, does it have anything to say to some of our young people, whose self esteem is sometimes so low? What are the reasons for low self esteem among our youth, and what does the Gospel have to say about them?]

[**Continued discussion:** There was a report in the *Atlanta Constitution* yesterday, about why kids carry guns. The answer that most gave was double: guns make them feel safe, and guns make them feel like they are somebody. What can we do, as youth workers, to make young people feel safe, and to help them realize that they are somebody?]

The text, however, says more than that we are royal. We are a royal priesthood. The two terms, royalty and priesthood, are often found together in the Bible. They often appear together because both priests and kings were anointed as a sign of election and office. In the Old Testament, they appear together in a single person in the case of that mysterious Melchizedek,

king of Salem, who is also called priest of the Lord Most High (Gn. 14:18). The book of Hebrews later picks up on Melchizedek, and says that Jesus is “high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (6:20). Whatever else that might mean, it means that in Jesus kingship and priesthood have come together again, as they did in Melchizedek.

This text in I Peter brings the two together, and says that we are a “royal priesthood.”

Apparently, this was a fairly common theme in early Christianity, for twice in the book of Revelation (1:6 and 5:10) the two ideas are again brought together.

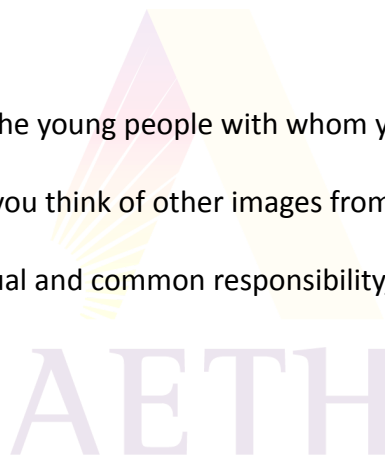
In any case, what is important for us here is that these people who had every reason for a low self esteem are not only royalty; they are also priests.

We have all heard about the priesthood of all believers. What we usually mean by that is that we can each approach God directly, without the need of a priest or a hierarchy to open access to God. That is true. But it misses the most important point of our common and royal priesthood. Normally a priest is someone who approaches God on behalf of others. Priests do not bring only themselves before God; they bring all the people and their concerns before God. Therefore, to speak of the “priesthood of all believers” does not mean only that we can each approach God on our own behalf; it means also that we must each approach God on behalf of all the others. To be a part of this people of God that I Peter is describing, to be part of this royal priesthood, is to be a priest for the whole people before God. We are each responsible, not only

for ourselves, but for all others. And this means, not only all others in the church, but all others in the world. In a way, the very first act of Christian mission is a priestly act; it is the act of bringing the world before God in prayer.

If we go back to the image of the building, that we discussed Wednesday, to be a part of this building means to hold up the entire building. In a well built stone building, each stone contributes to the stability, not only of the stones that rest on it, but even of the stones below it.

(Discussion: What do you think the young people with whom you work would say if you told them that they are priests? Can you think of other images from their daily world that might serve to convey this idea of mutual and common responsibility, and of a responsibility for the world in which they live?)



The Epistle then says that this chosen race and royal priesthood is also “a holy nation, God's own people.” There is no time to discuss these in much detail. Let it suffice to say that what I Peter is doing is applying to its readers the same titles that the Old Testament applied to Israel. This is not necessarily to say that the church has supplanted Israel. The Epistle is not dealing with that. What it is saying is that all the Old Testament said and promised about Israel is also to be said and promised about this new people. The Epistle is clearly claiming that this band of exiles, of rootless people whom society belittles, is heir to the promises made to Israel of old.

That is the reason for the lines in verse 10. The meaning of those lines becomes clear when we remember that the prophet Hosea had named his first daughter Loruhamah, that is, “not pitied,” or “not receiving mercy,” and the son who came after that, Loammi, “not my people.” This is in Hosea 1. But in the next chapter, as a sign of God’s enduring love and forgiveness, Hosea was told to change these two children’s names to “my people” and “pitied.” Hosea was to do this, because in spite of Israel’s waywardness God would have mercy, and would continue calling Israel God’s people.

And so the Epistle says that we are “a holy nation and God’s own people.” But this is not because of our own holiness or our own worthiness. It is because the same God who changed the name of “Not-my-people” to “My-people” also now changes our name, and makes us, who were not a people, God’s own people.

But I said at the beginning that there were three main differences between the notion of a “chosen race” as it appears in secular society, with all its resulting atrocities, and the notion of a “chosen race” as it appears here in I Peter. At that point, I tried to summarize the first two reasons, and said I would leave the third to the end. That third reason appears in the second half of v. 9: “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

The first two differences had to do with the cause or the origin of our chosenness. This third difference has to do with the goal or the purpose of our chosenness. We are not chosen in order to become a superior race over all others, as some supposedly “chosen races” claim to be. We are not chosen in order to enjoy special privilege, or power, or prestige, or success. We are chosen in order to proclaim the mighty acts of the God who has chosen us. God may have chosen us; but this does not place us center-stage. The center of the stage still belongs to God, and our role is to announce God’s power and God's mercy.

The Bible speaks of many mighty acts of God. It speaks of the great act of creation, when all things sprang out of God's word. It speaks of the mighty act of the Exodus, when God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. But of all those mighty acts, I Peter chooses to highlight one: “that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

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This is the one act of God that we cannot proclaim without at the same time proclaiming our own unworthiness. We can sing to God “How great Thou art” for making mountains, and oceans, and flowers, and sunsets, and avoid saying much about ourselves. But when we proclaim God’s amazing grace we cannot avoid declaring that what is most amazing, and most oddly divine, about that grace, is precisely that it “saved a wretch like me.”

Yes, we are a chosen people. But the only privilege for which we have been chosen is this strange privilege of proclaiming that somehow we, these wretches, these stones of rejection, have found a place in the house that God is building, and that therefore there is a place in God's house even for the most wretched, the most derelict, the most unworthy.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, and

"The stone that the builders rejected
Has become the very head of the corner,"

and

"A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.