

# **Their Souls Did Magnify the Lord (1/5)**

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## Their Souls Did Magnify the Lord (1 out of 5)

**Catherine:** When we were asked to write the Bible study book on I Peter. We were very glad of the chance to do so, since it was a favorite book for both of us. We also liked the opportunity to work on one small book, where we could really deal with the entirety of the writing, rather than having to choose passages from a variety of books of the Bible to deal with a particular theme.

From the point of view of writing, it is a different experience. That is to say, when there is a theme, then the authors are in a certain sense in charge of what Biblical passages are to be studied. That has some advantages—and we have on occasion worked in that fashion. If the study is on one book, but a very long one, then the authors still have to pick and choose what parts are to be studied and what ignored, since obviously, not everything can be covered. However, when an entire small book is to be studied, then one is forced to deal with the whole text. No verse, however troublesome or strange, can be eliminated. It is a different kind of study, one that we do not often undertake in the church.

At the same time, for groups using such a study, the continuity implied in studying a whole, brief book, may require some special effort, so that group members who have not been at all the meetings do not feel left out. Each chapter builds on the previous ones, and the groups may need to find ways to summarize—perhaps at the end of each session—in a brief paragraph—what the verses studied that day have meant to them, so that absent members can

hear this the next time, and be prepared to participate in the next discussion.

I Peter is brief—about five pages of text in most Bibles. It is a letter—written to a group of churches in Asia Minor. It is said to be by Peter, though at the end it also states that Silvanus has actually done the writing. It is a little hard to date, since according to tradition Peter died about the year 65. Yet the spread of churches through Asia Minor and the situation depicted in the letter, with the threat of persecution, is one that occurred a bit later than 65. But probably the teachings of Peter are here, even if written a bit later by another hand.

Because it is a letter written to many churches and not to one, it is dealing with situations that Christians in the whole area are likely to face, not with problems or difficulties in one particular congregation, which is more typical of the letters of Paul. The author may not have known these congregations personally, and is therefore giving general advice and counsel to Christians. For that reason, the letter can speak quite directly to us as well.

The time is the latter part of the first century. The area comprises several provinces of the Roman Empire in Asia Minor—in what is today Turkey. The church has begun to spread throughout the Empire. It is no longer mostly composed of Jews, but now, especially in Asia Minor, it is made up largely of Gentile—that is to say, non-Jewish—members. It is still generally a first-generation church. Most of its members have left other religious orientations in order to become part of this new faith.

The Empire itself is strong. It surrounds the Mediterranean Sea on all sides. Commerce is flourishing because of the good and fairly safe roads the Empire has built. The Mediterranean itself is heavily used for trade and commerce, since the Empire has kept it safe from pirates that had been a threat earlier. Cities are developing, and many people are traveling for reasons of business, or moving from one place to another in the Empire. The times are fluid; change is in the air; cultures are mixing in these new cities, and therefore individuals have more choices about their lifestyles than they had earlier—even—or especially—in religious matters.

The new faith of the Christian church is particularly appealing to those who are seeking changes in their lives—those who are not content with things as they have been and are ready for the new. Many of these people may have moved recently, and find they are not part of the traditional structures of the city where they now are. Perhaps they are involved in a small trade or craft—like Paul the tentmaker, and Priscilla and Aquila who were also tentmakers—whom we know from other parts of the New Testament.

Not many are wealthy. In fact, most are probably fairly low on the social totem pole. There are many slaves. The exception is the women, who seem to come from a wider variety of social classes than the men. That is to say, there are more well-to-do women than men—such as Lydia, the seller of purple—though there are probably many women of lower social classes. The church cuts through several of the social barriers that are typical of the wider society.

**Justo:** After the first two verses, which tell us who is writing and to whom, verse 3 moves to a doxology or act of praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The reason for this great shout of praise is both something that has taken place in the past and something that looks to the future. In the past there is the new birth: “By his great mercy we have been born anew.” If anything is necessary in order to understand the message of this epistle, it is that we rediscover the importance of this new birth. Unfortunately, we have yielded the use of such images to people who are always talking of “born-again Christians.” The fact of the matter is that the very phrase, “born-again Christian,” is redundant, for a Christian can be nothing but born again.

Actually, what the Greek text of I Peter says is much more radical than that. It does not really say “born anew.” What it says is “begotten anew,” conceived anew. The new birth, the new creation, is so radical, so new a beginning, that one can speak of it as a new begetting, a new act of conception. As such, it is not simply a matter of changing one’s life, abandoning whatever sinful practices one followed earlier, and becoming a faithful member of the church. It is a matter of being part of an entirely new creation, one in which not only oneself, but also all relations are created anew.

We are all familiar with the passage of John 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born anew. When reading that passage, we often think that Nicodemus must have been dense,

not to understand what Jesus was saying. But the truth is that Nicodemus probably balked at the idea because he did understand what Jesus was saying, and it was too radical for him. Jesus was not speaking of a cheap “new birth” that one can turn on and off, or of one that one can parade as a badge of commitment. Jesus was speaking of a radical new beginning, one that would change all of Nicodemus’ relations, his standing in society, in his family, and even in his religious community.

Because of that new birth, the text says, we have a “living hope.” It is important to understand also what this means. It does not mean only a hope that happens to be alive. It is much more than that. It is a hope that is alive, that is so alive that it cannot die or be killed. It is a hope that does not depend on external circumstances, and which therefore produces the tremendous and overflowing joy that is such a characteristic of this entire epistle. It is not hope as in “I hope that the Braves win tonight.” It is not hope as in “I hope to see you soon.” It is not hope as in “I hope this meal turns out alright.” It is a hope so grounded on certainty, so sealed by the promises and the actions of God, that it cannot fade.

For the same reason, it is a “living hope” also in the sense that it is a hope by which one can live. I would not stake my life on the hope that the Braves win tonight! No sane person would stake their life on the hope that a meal turns out alright. But this hope is different. This hope is such that what the Epistle tells us again and again is that we can stake our lives on it.

A “living hope” is such that it guides our present actions. If we stop to think about it, we realize that much of our lives are lived out of a future which we expect or which we seek. When I got up this morning, I decided what to wear on the basis of where I expected to do later on in the day. When I leave my driveway, I turn either right or left on the basis of where I hope or plan to go. If, as Christians, we have this “living hope,” we are to live accordingly.

The Epistle breaks out in praise because we have this new birth and this living hope. And this we have “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The resurrection is the basis for our new birth. As Paul says, Jesus Christ is the New Adam in whom we have life. In him there is a new creation. In his death and resurrection, we die to the old life and are born to the new. If we have been granted a new birth, a new begetting, it is because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, it is because of that resurrection that we have a “living hope.” The resurrection is the sign that nothing, not even death, can destroy the basis for our hope. We hope, not because we are dreamy optimists, not because we trust our own capabilities, but because God raised Jesus from the dead, and because in him our hope has begun to be fulfilled.

What the Epistle is describing in these first verses is the strange lot of Christians, who must live out of a new reality while still being part of the old. The Epistle is addressed to Christians who have been begotten anew, but who still live in the old creation; who rejoice in a living hope, and who yet continue to be part of a society that does not share in that hope. It is because of this

tension that I Peter calls its readers “exiles.” It is also because of this tension that we shall find in this epistle both an unbounded joy and a very realistic expectation of suffering and difficulty. Without understanding this tension, one might come to the conclusion that the Epistle was written by a pessimist who enjoyed suffering, or that it was written by an optimist who could only see the rosy side of every situation. The truth is that it was written by someone who, trusting in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, had been begotten to a new life, and therefore had a living and imperishable hope.

**Catherine:** This strange sense of living between a past that has changed one’s life, and a future that has not yet fully arrived, is not unique to these Christians. It is paralleled strongly in the faith of Israel. In fact, though the readers of this letter are largely Gentiles, the writer has constantly tied them to the history of Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures are quoted constantly. Just as Israel had once been in bondage in Egypt and had been freed by a mighty act of God, and had been promised a new future and a new life in the Promised Land, so Christians have been freed from the bondage of sin and futility, and promised a new life in the Kingdom. Just as Israel had to go through the whole period in the wilderness, in preparation for the life in the Promised Land, so Christians are even now in a kind of Wilderness, learning painfully and slowly to live the kind of life that they will need to be at home in the Kingdom that is to be theirs. In the words of I Peter, these Christians have been “called out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). They have made their own Exodus.

In the same way that Israel, in the terrible time in the Wilderness, had to learn to trust in God for all that they needed, and constantly was tempted to return to the familiar but false life in Egypt, so these Christians are having to learn through some difficult experiences that God can indeed be trusted, and that their true life rests in faithfulness to God.

Furthermore, Israel was transformed into a People by their covenant with God. From a ragtag band of slaves they became a People—with their own identity. What made them a people was that God had called them. They had once not been a people—and now they were God’s People. I Peter uses this statement from the prophet Hosea to apply to the church as well: “Once you were no people but now you are God's people.” Indeed, when we remember the wide variety of people who made up the early church, especially with the admission of the Gentiles, they had little in common—not culture or native language or common education or social condition. In fact, what made them a people was that God had called them into this one body. They were God’s people through Christ. That was the only thing they had in common to begin with. But even as Israel, by means of the Covenant Law, had to learn how to be God’s People, so these Christians also have to learn to be the kind of community they have been called to be. It is not easy, and often they slip back into earlier patterns of life.

Even as Israel was called for a purpose, to be God’s witness to the Gentiles, by the witness of their common life, so the church is called. And I Peter applies to the church the words of Exodus to Israel: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people” (2:9).

Throughout the letter, the parallel between Israel and the church is made. The pattern of God's action is the same. But obviously there is also a difference. The Promised Land was never permanent. Exile and destruction was possible. Disobedience and sin could bring judgment and punishment there. The Kingdom is a different matter. It is imperishable, a hope that cannot be destroyed, for sin and death have been conquered in Christ's resurrection. And we ourselves are learning to be holy. It is not only that sin has been forgiven—it has been conquered. What we are learning in the remainder of our wilderness experience is to live out from under the bondage to sin—to live as those freed from sin. We are not yet ready for the kingdom, but the Holy Spirit is even now working in our lives to prepare us for that new land. No exile is possible from the kingdom. No sin will ruin it or bring new judgment. There are strong parallels for the church with the history of Israel, for it is the same God who works in similar ways, preparing a people for mission and for a future. But the differences cannot be overlooked.

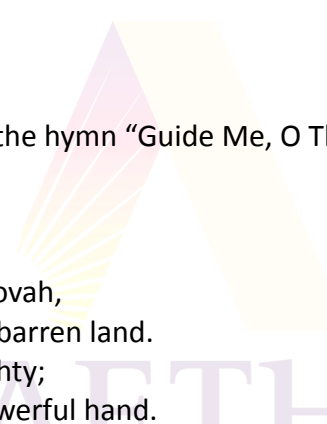
The metaphors are strangely mixed in I Peter. We have been born anew—and yet we are like Israel coming out of Egypt. We are babes, new born, just learning to live this new life, and yet we are Israel wandering in the wilderness. We are preparing for the kingdom that has been won for us by Christ, and yet we are Israel preparing to cross the Jordan into Canaan. We are used to these mixed images in our tradition. Whether it is the old Spiritual or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Jerusalem is the heavenly city; the Jordan is the river we cross at death; Canaan is the heavenly land. Paul can write to the Corinthians:

I want you to know, my brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the

sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ (I Cor. 10:1-4).

In other words, not only are the Christians following the same pattern that ancient Israel followed, but Israel was also in a strange way, following the Christian pattern even before the time of Christ. They were baptized as they crossed the Red Sea and they received a hidden form of communion in the manna. The parallels work in both directions. Therefore it is not surprising that in our hymns and our literature, we constantly mix our metaphors, combining Israel's story with our own.

One of the best examples of this is the hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." Hear the familiar words:



Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand.  
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
death of death and hell's destruction,  
land me safe on Canaan's side.  
Songs of praises I will ever give to thee.

**Justo:** In the Exodus, as in Hosea, what God does is to make a people of those who were no people. This is also true of I Peter, as Catherine has just said. But in chapter 1, verse 4 we have an image that at first may seem different. We have been born anew, the Epistle says, not only to "a living hope," but also to "an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfailing, kept

in heaven for you.”

In order to understand this, we have to realize that in the Roman ancient world inheritances played a much more important role than they do among us today. For us an inheritance is something which we receive when somebody dies. Before the previous owner dies, the inheritance makes little difference. We do not define ourselves in terms of our inheritance, and we have little sympathy for anyone who sits around waiting for an inheritance. Except for the children of the fabulously rich, people's place in society depends much more on what they do, and on what they actually have, than on their prospective inheritance.

In the ancient world, on the other hand, your prospective inheritance was what determined your status in society. Occupations were a very minor factor in this regard. Indeed, in Roman society all work for pay was considered demeaning, except soldiering. The same was true of small-scale agriculture and trade, which was considered little better than thievery. What was important was what family you belonged to, whose heir you were, what your inheritance was. This made for a society in which social mobility was very limited. Those who were the presumptive heirs of another already enjoyed their status as heirs, and did not have to wait until that other person died. An inheritance, even before coming into actual possession of it, was what determined one's place in society and one's worth.

By contrast with the fortunate few who were someone's heirs, most people, including women and slaves, could not even receive an inheritance. Not only socially, but even legally, their status was quite restricted.

And now this Epistle tells these Christian, many of whom are women and slaves, many of whom are also poor, that they have an imperishable inheritance that is being kept for them in heaven. For any of us, it would be nice to be told that we have an unexpected inheritance. Imagine how much more so in the case of these people, who not only had no inheritance, but were not even legally capable of having one. They too have an inheritance. They are somebody. I Peter really means it when it says: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people!" Once you were nobody, for you had no inheritance. Now you have an inheritance "which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." It is for this reason that "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

Being born anew is closely related to this new inheritance. Notice that what the text literally says is that we have been begotten anew to an inheritance. One's inheritance depends on one's begetting. A reader of this Epistle who was a slave had no possibility of having an inheritance—except one of slavery. A reader of this Epistle who was begotten as a woman had no possibility of having an inheritance. A reader of this Epistle who was begotten the heir of a rich aristocrat is now told that there is a different begetting, and therefore a different inheritance that supercedes the earlier one.

Being begotten anew means having a living hope, and having also an imperishable inheritance; but it also means being part of a new people and of a new family, and this in such a way that the ties of the old begetting are now superceded by new bonds. No matter to what race these people originally belonged, now they are a chosen race, a holy nation. And no matter to what family they originally belonged, they are now part of the household of God.

This sounds very beautiful, and it is. It sounds very promising, and it is. It sounds joyful, and it is. But there is another side to this new reality: in affirming the new, the old is also denied. To be born again means, not only accepting the promise and the inheritance, but also denying or at least relativizing the present reality, the present bonds and the present inheritance. It is for this reason that, as we shall see tomorrow, trial and suffering play such an important role in this very joyous epistle.

**Catherine:** The church was a very new institution in the Roman Empire. For us, it is a normal part of the culture. The early church did not include the “movers and shakers” of the first century, in terms of the Roman Empire. We are accustomed to having most important public figures related to the church in at least a token fashion. We may have a difficult time understanding how the wider society in the time of this epistle viewed the church. Even in the cities where the church existed—and it was almost totally an urban phenomenon—many people may have been unaware of its existence, or even unaware of what a Christian was. Even those who had heard of it had heard also strange rumors of Christian practices—even

cannibalism and orgies! Those who knew that neighbors were Christians might very well have felt these were dangerous people, or at least socially unpopular. They were crossing social lines that ought not to be crossed; they might be upsetting the stable order of things. Who knew exactly what they were doing? Besides, the “best people” did not have anything to do with them.

The Empire was not seeking out Christians for persecution. But the Empire was conservative, and did not like new ways of thinking. Christians might be dangerous. People should be discouraged from joining such a group.

If this is the framework within which the churches receiving this letter are living, then we can understand the possibility of persecution that the letter addresses. There is no wholesale rounding up of Christians. That would occur much later. But there was suspicion on the part of many. And Roman officials did punish Christians, if they were reported by neighbors. By a few years after this letter, we know that those who were reported to be Christians were called before the authorities and given the chance to recant, by renouncing Jesus. If they refused to do this, they were subject to death. We do not know the exact situation at this time, but such an extreme penalty was possible.

Christians would not take part in some of the ordinary ceremonies of the city—which included the worship of the ancient gods. They did not have the family altars with the gods sacred to the

family. Therefore they were often thought to be atheists and unpatriotic—and that hardly made their neighbors positive toward them.

It must have been difficult to have been bursting with the joy of God's redemptive activity in one's life—thrilled with the new sense of purpose and value—only to be misunderstood and viewed as dangerous, by one's neighbors and perhaps even by one's own family. That contrast between the joy and hope given by the Gospel and the suspicion and fear aroused by membership in the church is the reality to which this letter is addressed. It is giving counsel to Christians caught in this situation.

Because it is not our situation, perhaps it seems very strange to us. Yet a careful study may show us ways in which we indeed can and do face similar situations. And we know that we are part of a worldwide church, and that there are Christians who know exactly what it means to live between joy and fear of suffering, both brought about by faith. Such Christians in our own day often exhibit this same overwhelming joy in their faith, when we might assume that the possibility of persecution would have dampened such joy. It may be that the true joy of faith comes into sharpest focus when there is the possibility of suffering. When to be a Christian is the expected thing, and seems very easy—perhaps the real joy also grows faints. This is quite counter to the opinion of some Christians today, who hold that those who have faith will not suffer—that faith keeps all suffering away.

We have much to learn from these ancient Christians, and a letter of advice to them can also be a letter of advice to us.

