

Aliens and Strangers-Part Two: “New Birth and New Faith!”

1 Peter 1: 3-7

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Sunday October 9, 2011

Text: (NIV) ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter just said that my faith...your faith...needs to be proven “genuine.” Genuine? Why? Is it possibly *not...* “genuine?” In what sense do the trials of life prove that we are really people of faith who are living out the new birth? Perhaps there is another way to translate Peter’s words? The New American Standard Bible speaks of “proof” of our faith. That’s not much help. Proof? Genuine? The translated word [doe-kimeo-on] really means something that is able to withstand a test. So...why would Peter have a pastoral concern for the ability of their faith, or our faith, to withstand testing? To be genuine or proven? Obviously, he was concerned that they be sure their faith was genuine! Real faith. So...how can we who are aliens and strangers here on Planet Earth be sure that our faith...is genuine? Good questions. First, let us pray.

I am holding a golf club. An eight iron to be more precise. I’ll tell you a great story about this club. I bought it along with the rest of the set of clubs from a vendor on Ebay. I did that because it is a few years old and when the set was new it cost much more than I want to spend on golf clubs. But this set was virtually new and I bought it at about twenty five per cent of its original cost. So, I was either a very sharp shopper in this transaction...or I am a silly fellow who was recently fooled by a devious vendor. Why do I say that? Because these expensive golf clubs are being counterfeited all over the world and many times people buy them not realizing that they are getting just a good fake or a copy. And sometimes the counterfeit clubs will play well but they will not stand up over time and it will become apparent that they are not genuine. But I bought them we because the seller had a good reputation and I had ten days to send them back. But I took a chance. Are they genuine? Yes. They are. And I’ll tell you how I know. In a little while!

Let’s consider Peter’s line of thought and argument in these verses. He begins:

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

A couple of times over the years I’ve heard someone say “Well, I’m a Christian but I’m not one of those born again types!” But, of course, if you have not been born again you are not a Christian! There are

religious people all over the planet who have not been born again. Here, Peter is praising God for the new birth that only comes from the Holy Spirit. Just to be certain there is no question about this, let's review briefly the well-known passage from John Chapter Three when a Jewish leader named Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night...so as to meet with him privately. Consider this exchange:

John 3:2-8 (NIV) ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Being born again means that the Holy Spirit has taken the initiative to move upon your soul. The Holy Spirit is like the wind! It cannot be tracked or even predicted. But it is an act of grace that the Holy Spirit moves upon anyone! Now, it is interesting that Jesus defines the result of being born again in a very specific way. Jesus says only by being born again can one see or enter the Kingdom of God! Last week we spoke of remembering where our true country is. Christians should understand that in Christ they have a new citizenship and a new passport and a new address. They are now residents of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom exists here on Earth among the Lord's people as a branch office! But it fully exists unseen to us in the presence of God in Heaven. But, in any case, we are "Kingdom people!" This all happened because of God's initiative! Thus Peter says:

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

God be praised! But this is important....we are Kingdom people by the grace of God! Because of his mercies! Peter is insisting that they understand that their salvation was an act of God's mercy! Just as an unborn child did nothing to bring about its conception, the child of God did nothing to bring about spiritual birth! In other words, unless a person comes to Christ they have only been born once. The same words used by Peter "born again" mean "born from above" which is the same thing. And...just as a newborn child has a whole life ahead to live, the born again person in Christ has been born into a living hope! A life of walking with Christ and looking forward to Heaven! But why and how? Because God initiates that new birth.

Peter goes on to emphasize that the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is what brought this about. The natural person spends their whole life aware of death and, if they are honest, afraid of death. I read that Darwin said he had absolutely no fear of death. Many today are saying the same thing. Many of our famous modern skeptics are saying they give no thought to death. It is us the end of life. Period. No problem.

I do not believe it when they say that! It is not true because the Word of God says otherwise! In fact, we read in the Book of Hebrews that Jesus:

Hebrews 2:15 (NIV) ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Jesus frees those who all their lives had a fear of death in the back of their minds! The Resurrection of Jesus not only proved who he was and is but gave him the victory over physical death. This is what Peter means when he says we have been given a “living hope.” We have been given a “living Christ!” But he is about to take his ideas down a more important street. It's as if he is saying “Could anything be more critical than this...what I've just said”? God in his mercy has given you both a new life and filled you with hope. Peter goes on to promise that this hope is guaranteed by God himself! We read:

⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice...

Think about it Christian. An inheritance that is perfect and cannot in any way spoil and is guaranteed by God himself! This whole teaching is....think about it please...**FUTURE ORIENTED!** The Word of God is pointing us to the future! The Word of God is saying that whatever we have now or enjoy now...that's fine! But it is short-lived and will not last and is not what true life is really all about! True life is about the great inheritance!

An interesting thing happened this last week. Very interesting. Steve Jobs died. Only 56 years old, Mr. Jobs struggled with cancer and he is gone. He was obviously very brilliant and made a great contribution to our high tech society with his Apple products. Now let me say very respectfully that I know nothing about his spiritual status before or after death. I hope for the best for him. But it is fascinating that the press for several days has focused on all that he accomplished in the world. But when I read those comments...while they are accurate...I think of the Lord Jesus Christ saying these words:

Mark 8:36 (NIV) ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

I do not know that Steve Jobs did that. I'm merely captured by this teaching of Jesus. Namely, that the man or woman who does not look to their eternal well-being is a fool. Remember the man who built bigger barns to store all of his stuff? And Jesus portrayed him this way:

Luke 12:20 (NIV) ²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

The person who has not arranged for the eternal future is a fool. So, we're back to Peter's promise. This is all about the inheritance given by God. I realize that there seems to be an internal contradiction here. I am saying the inheritance is all by grace

and cannot happen unless God ordains it. At the same time, I'm saying that the person who neglects this offer is a fool. I cannot explain that except to say that God gives warnings intended to motivate those he is calling. But our bigger point in church is to gather to worship and praise God who for some reason of his own...has arranged the eternal inheritance *for us!* I remember one day shortly after becoming a Christian that I was feeling surprised that God had opened my eyes to Christ.

This new birth...this birth from above by the Holy Spirit...makes us different from those people who have never experienced it. We not only receive admission to the Kingdom here and now, but we are promised an inheritance. Think about it. If you had a great uncle die and leave you and others a substantial inheritance...that would be fine right? But what if you went to the court for the reading of your uncle's will and others showed up who were not named in it? Someone would have to tell them they were uninvited. They may have thought that they would be named in it but the Judge would say they were not. You might say "Why me?" The answer is grace. The grace of God.

The Word of God is telling the children of God in advance that they are in line for the inheritance! And it is an inheritance strictly by grace! And we know it in advance! Half of the joy of our Christian faith is looking forward to what we know is coming!

There is an amusing story on the internet about a Portuguese man who took a telephone directory and chose seventy complete strangers to name in his will. He picked the names at random and had witnesses watch as he worked thru a Lisbon phone book. He did not tell them in advance and all were shocked when thirteen years later they were invited to the hearing after the man's death. Each inherited a small fortune! The only thing this beneficent multi-millionaire might have done differently was tell them in advance that they were named as inheritors. Think about it...would they have lived differently knowing all the while that whatever they faced in life they would, in the end, inherit a fortune? Do we live...with that in mind?

Our inheritance has only this in common with that curious story. We did nothing to deserve it but we do know in advance that God has arranged it! The giver, God, chose us but certainly not at random from a phone book. But we know it is coming our way and we know that it is being kept safe for us! It is kept in Heaven and it cannot spoil, perish or fade.

"...kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power!"

Why do we need to be "shielded?" The word used also means "protected" by God's power until that salvation is final in God's presence. In other words, the inheritance awaits us and God will not let us fall away from all that He has planned for us! This new birth implies a new faith and since it is a faith originated by God it is a faith that God will maintain! Once we understand that we are Christians because God called us to himself and revealed himself to us in Christ...we can understand that he will not let us go.

Now, what Peter is really leading up to here should speak to us today in our society. He is giving the Christians in the church a sense of perspective! He is reminding them of who they are in Christ...what they have and what they will have...if their faith is genuine. Peter wants them to adopt a whole new attitude about life and faith and what God is doing in their lives. And us too! What we need is an attitude consistent with being “Kingdom of God people!”

Listen closely please. This inheritance is so much greater than anything this life offers...that we must...we must be certain that we are named by God to receive it. So, we’re all the way back to the original question: why does Peter concern himself with the question of genuine and provable saving faith? Because the other kind will only look good but it will fail us. Something has to happen to bring about the testing of our faith!

Let’s be honest about a certain reality. When severe trials come our way...financial and familial and our health is made doubtful...somewhere deep down inside we say something to ourselves that we would not say out loud. We whisper quietly “I cannot understand the Lord. Why...when he has made me his own...does he allow such hurtful and troubling things in my life? Does he not know that I would be much happier without these things?” But here is Peter’s response and the point of much of the Bible: God does not necessarily want us happy as we define happy. He wants us...eternally secure! He wants us saved forever! And he will allow and ordain pain to make that happen.

There is a marvelous scene in the movie “Shadowlands” about the life of C.S. Lewis. He is speaking to a gathering of women in England and the subject is pain. He is mentioning tragedies in the news and suffering. And he says something that the audience finds surprising. He says “You see...I’m not sure that God wants us to be free of pain. I rather think that pain is God’s megaphone to a lost and dying world.” Exactly. So Peter writes:

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The trials will come not at random or because God has gone off duty. The trials will come not because God does not care. The trials will come not because they build character although they do. The trials will come because they will allow our faith to be tested as to its genuine nature! Is it a real faith? Is it a faith that can stand the test? Is it a faith that can be melted down? Notice Peter’s comment:

⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire...

Despite what the ads are saying, gold can lose its value. It can be melted down and if it is not gathered properly to be re-shaped, it will simply dissolve into a fine dust.

Your faith then is far more valuable than even gold! How many people have spent their lives trying to gather gold only to die in despair?

In 1906, a guy named Burro Schmidt started to dig a tunnel thru a mountain in Death Valley, California. His plan was to gather up all of the gold he could find and transport it over to the other side of the mountain where it could be put on wagons and carried to market. He would become a millionaire over and over because no one else had ever found a way to move all that gold. So, Burro Schmidt spent 38 years digging thru the mountain. He grew old and lost his health and was nearly blind. When he was just about to break thru, he took a couple of days off and journeyed around to the other side to check it out. There he found that the railroad had arrived and it circled all the way around his mountain. His tunnel was unnecessary and he had wasted his life digging it. His work was pointless and he never moved the gold to market because others seized it. He died an old man broken by his labors...with no inheritance.

Burro Schmidt endured all kinds of trials but they were not Heaven-sent. Therefore, they were useless to his soul and he gained nothing from them. Thus, Peter wrote:

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Genuine faith. Proven to be authentic faith. The golf clubs? The other day, I called the company that manufactures these clubs. They are in California. I got the customer service desk and asked for their help. The man said "Sure. Just read me the little tiny serial number on the hosel of the eight iron." I did that and he took a moment and said they were the real article and he described the set I had purchased. Easy as that.

Now...wouldn't it be nice if we could ring up an 800 number to Heaven to be sure that our faith is genuine? But we cannot. Instead, God sends trials our way to test our faith and then we realize what new faith and new birth are about. And how that new faith and new birth belong exclusively to those who are aliens and strangers here on Planet Earth. More on this next week.

Let us pray.