

1 Peter 1. 22 to 2. 3. Bethesda Bible Teaching. Lord's Day 8 February 2009.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth unto an unfeigned brotherly love, love one another earnestly from the heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the living and abiding word of God. Because ... 'All flesh is as grass and all its glory as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever'. ... And this is the word which was preached as good news to you.

Putting away therefore all wickedness and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, as newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow up into salvation—since you have tasted that the Lord is kind.

Peter makes it clear that Christians should be marked not only by hope¹ and holiness,² but by harmony.³ And our section for this morning – which straddles the ill-placed chapter division – is bound together by references both to our new life in Christ and to the word of God.

You may have noticed that our section contains just two main commands – 'love one another earnestly from the heart' in chapter 1 verse 22, and 'long for the pure milk of the word' in the second verse of chapter 2. That is, Peter would say, the believer should be marked by loving and by longing – by both an affection for God's people and an appetite for God's word.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth unto an unfeigned brotherly love, love one another earnestly from the heart ...

As a Christian, the apostle says, I must love, not only the Lord, whom, according to verse 8, I have not seen, but my brothers and sisters in Christ whom I have seen, and can see. As John says very bluntly in chapter 4 of his first letter, 'If someone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?'⁴ Both Peter and John had learned directly from the Lord Jesus that love for one's brother was the very badge and test of true discipleship.⁵

And in that our Lord and His apostles command us to love one another, clearly the love to which they refer is not so much a matter of feeling but of willing ... springing from a 'conscious resolve'. And this love is, Peter stresses, to be 'unfeigned'; literally 'not-hypocritical'. This is the negative of the word we meet in verse 1 of chapter 2. Such love, that is, is diametrically opposed to all pretence; it is genuine and sincere. And *it is* whole-hearted. I have no doubt that the apostle would have endorsed what Warren Wiersbe wrote when commenting on these verses, 'It is impossible to love the truth and hate the brethren'.⁶

Another form of the word translated 'earnestly' is used, interestingly, of the prayer of the church at Jerusalem for Peter, recorded in Acts chapter 12 verse 5. A case, I guess, of earnest prayer stirred by earnest love. The word is also used in Luke 22, not only to describe the prayers of our Lord in Gethsemane,⁷ but also of men 'stretching out' their hands to arrest someone.⁸ Indeed, the word may well carry the thought here of loving 'at full stretch'. And I note that one ancient Greek writer⁹ used the word to describe a horse at full gallop.

But the word indicates, not only 'all-out' effort, but also perseverance. And the meaning suggested by some scholars, '*keep love constant*', fits the context here extremely well.¹⁰ And would explain, in part at least, the reason why Peter introduced at this point his quotation from Isaiah 40. For that passage emphasises the permanence of God's word in contrast to the frailty and the transience of that which is natural. Perhaps Peter has in mind that our love for one another should be lasting because that 'word' through which we received our new life is itself lasting.

Certainly, the apostle slots in his demand for earnest, constant love between two references to the believer's conversion experience: 'Having purified your souls by your obedience¹¹ to the truth', and 'Having been born again¹², not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible ...'.

It was Peter who opened the so-called Council of Jerusalem of Acts 15 by saying of the Gentiles, 'God ... made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith'.¹³ And at the time you believed and obeyed the truth of the gospel, Peter is now saying, you too were purified.

Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the living and abiding word of God.

Proselytes (converts to the Jewish faith) are sometimes said to be 'as an infant just born'. But we *really have* received new, spiritual, life. And so Peter's first chapter ends as it began – with a reference to our regeneration. But now focusing, not on *who* gave us our new birth –or *why* –or *to what, by means of what*; namely, by means of the word of God. For it is through the instrumentality of that word that God has implanted His own 'incorruptible' life in us.¹⁴ We are therefore, as Peter expresses it in his second letter, 'partakers of the divine nature'.¹⁵

And, unlike everything around us, God's word lives and abides for ever. Had not the apostle once joined our Lord on the Mount of Olives when looking over Jerusalem, and heard Him say, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away'.¹⁶ It has been well said that we therefore have a firmer foundation for our faith than we do for our feet!

Because 'All flesh is as grass and all its glory as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever'. And this is the word which was preached as good news to you.

Everything in the natural world is transitory and frail – vegetation as well as human beings – because it is the product of corruptible seed.

The passage which Peter quotes from Isaiah 40 was written to 'comfort' those who were exiled and oppressed. And, given the situation facing Peter's readers, it is difficult to imagine a more relevant portion of scripture. For they were, according to verse 1, 'sojourners of the dispersion' – that latter word being used by Isaiah to describe those for whom he originally wrote.¹⁷ And to both sets of exiles the message was the same ... that, although the glories of all earthly empires would fade away and all human help is powerless and perishable, God's word will never fail or fail. The fulfillment of His people's hope is certain because His word 'remains forever'.

Flowers are the glory of natural vegetation, but, for all their beauty, the poppies and the lilies share the same fate as the blades of grass around them – they will each droop, fade and fall.

Generations of men come and go; just as the grass they perish and decay. And if some men achieve 'glory' – achieve fame and distinction by reason of rank, riches or education – by reason of their great achievements and successes – they too must pass away. As the Italian proverb says, 'When the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box'.¹⁸

In one sense, Peter now moves on from his readers' spiritual duty and their spiritual dignity to their spiritual diet. From the way in which they (i) *express the same love*, and the way in which they (ii) *experience the same life*, to the way in which they (iii) *enjoy the same food*.

But throughout the apostle keeps his focus on 'the word of God'. Save that now he switches from the word as that by which we *became* Christians to that by which we develop *as Christians* – from that by which we were *regenerated* to that by which we *grow*.

Leaving verse 1 for a moment, we read in verse 2, '***As newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow up into salvation***'.

The expression 'milk of the word' – which I am satisfied is the correct translation¹⁹ – links us back to verse 23 of chapter 1. Just as we have been born through God's word, we shall be nourished through that word. We grow in the Christian life by the same means we entered it. Here then is food, not for the stomach, but for the soul – ...**PP**... not for the mouth, but for the renewed mind. For the word of the Lord not only, according to chapter 1 verse 23, has life and gives life but it nurtures life.

I don't know whether you are aware of it, but today marks the end of National Dairy Week. Last Wednesday one Professor Robert Heaney, widely known (to some at least) for his work on calcium, went on record as saying, 'Amongst modern foods, dairy foods – particularly milk and yoghurt – stand out as having the richest nutrient profile for their energy content. They are typically rich in protein, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, and several of the B-vitamins'.

Hmm, all very nice. But, of course, Peter had in mind, not cows' juice, but a *mother's* milk, which, unlike cow's milk, also contains sufficient vitamin E and iron for a young baby – indeed, contains all the nutrients necessary for a baby's good health and growth.

As many of us with good memories will remember well, a new-born baby has an inbuilt desire for nourishment, and a very effective method of notifying grownups when it's feeding-time. Nor is the tiny tot going to be fobbed off with any amount of baby talk or any number of cuddles. It will sound the alarm as if its very life depends on that next feed.

'As newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word ...', says Peter. And, if a sign of a healthy infant is that he or she has a good appetite and craves his or her mother's milk, so one surefire test of a believer's spiritual health is his or her longing for – dare I say, his or her addiction to – the word of God.

And we must be careful not to confuse the picture here in verse 2 with that of 1 Corinthians 3²⁰ and Hebrews 5.²¹ In our passage, all Christians – of whatever age – are to feed on 'the milk of the word' – and that with the yearning of a new-born baby.

And I note that the word translated 'pure' is the negative form of the word translated 'guile' in the previous verse. At the risk of being over literal, you could say then that Peter writes of the 'without-guile' milk of God's word. *God's word*, that is, does not deceive, and neither, Peter insists, should *God's people*.

This particular word was sometimes used as a technical term for that which was unadulterated. Merchants would sometimes try to sell watered down or diluted wine – and the word here was used metaphorically to describe that which was 'unmixed' and 'genuine'. Well might we say with the psalmist, 'Your word is very pure; therefore your servant loves it'.²²

'... that by it you may grow up into salvation', Peter adds. Next week, God willing, John will tell us about being 'built up' and about 'offering up' from verse 5. But, for now, Peter is concerned with us 'growing up'²³ – and that 'into salvation' – into Christian maturity and adulthood – to become more holy, more devoted, more Christ-like. And, given that Christ-likeness is our ultimate goal, whereas there are clearly limits to our physical growth, there are no limits to our spiritual growth.

Oh that I could say with Job, 'I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food'.²⁴

And so back to verse 1 for a few moments.

Putting away therefore all wickedness / and all guile and hypocrisy and envy / and all slander ...

Most certainly, these vices must be discarded – must be stripped off, as the word is – if we are to make any spiritual progress. For they are certain to stunt our growth.

But Peter may have more in mind than that. He may be saying that such characteristics and attitudes will spoil our appetite for God's pure word – that, if we are to retain a healthy spiritual appetite, we must put aside all of those things which damage and destroy our fellowship with other Christians – all those things which run contrary to '*unfeigned brotherly love*'.²⁵ Perhaps Peter is saying that we cannot practice wickedness in the forms of guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander and still maintain our desire for, and enjoyment of, God's word.

The word translated 'wickedness' covers evil of all kinds. And I note that it was Simon Peter himself who used it of another Simon – the magician – in Acts 8.²⁶

'Guile' covers any devious words or actions. Our dealings with others are to be straightforward.

Hypocrisy is pretending to be what we are not. Peter knew all about hypocrisy – he had not only seen it in others;²⁷ he had discovered it in himself.²⁸

Envy is 'the desire to deprive someone else of what he or she has'.²⁹

The word rendered 'slander' is literally 'speaking against', and covers both the use of insulting language and the spread of unkind gossip – both of which are aimed, in the end, at running another person down.

You will see that, unlike with the words 'wickedness' and 'slander', Peter combined the words 'guile',³⁰ 'hypocrisy' and 'envy' under one single 'all'. And it is interesting to note that Peter had encountered all three on that sad occasion recorded in Acts 5 when Ananias and Sapphira clearly envied good Barnabas the credit and recognition which he had been rightly given, and attempted to gain the same for themselves – but by deceit, without paying the full price for it – hypocritically wanting others to believe that they were more spiritual than they really were.

'Since you have tasted that the Lord is kind', says verse 3.³¹ Without actually quoting, Peter has his eye very much on verse 8 of David's Psalm 34.³² It is, if I have it right, as if Peter is saying, 'Anybody who has once "tasted" – has once sampled – the kindness of our Lord Jesus will thereafter want all he or she can possibly get of Him and His word'. For surely, our past, personal experience of His graciousness can only stimulate our appetite for more.

So ... 'As newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow up ...'.

Footnotes

¹ 1 Pet. 1. 3-4.

² 1 Pet. 1. 14-16.

³ 1 Pet. 1. 22 and 2. 1.

⁴ 1 John 4. 20.

⁵ John 13. 35; cf. John 15. 12, 17.

⁶ 'Be hopeful', page 46.

⁷ Luke 22. 44.

⁸ Luke 22. 44, 53.

⁹ Xenophon.

¹⁰ For example, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, and J. R. Michaels.

¹¹ The theme of obedience runs through 1 Peter 1; see vv. 2, 14, 22.

¹² Where life is, love is.

¹³ Acts 15. 9.

¹⁴ The life implanted in us is like the inheritance which is reserved for us and the blood which redeemed us – 'incorruptible', 1 Pet. 1. 4, 18-19, 23.

¹⁵ 2 Peter 1. 4.

¹⁶ Matt. 24. 35.

¹⁷ Isa. 49. 6 LXX (the Greek Old Testament).

¹⁸ 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' is said over the graves of kings and beggars.

¹⁹ For the translation. 'Milk of the word', see D. B. Wallace ... http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4863

²⁰ 1 Cor. 3. 1-3.

²¹ Hebrews 5. 12-14.

²² Psa. 119. 140.

²³ Peter signed off his second letter, 'But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ', 2 Pet. 3. 18 – 'grace' and 'knowledge' respectively being the key words of his two letters. 'Grace' is found eight times in 1 Peter, and 'knowledge' seven times in 2 Peter.

²⁴ Job 23. 12.

²⁵ When Linda and I were staying in Bangalore, one day we went for a walk with James and the family around a nearby park. At one point, we crossed over a filthy stream. And I can tell you that the stench coming from that stream was enough to turn anyone's stomach – and to kill any desire for food.

²⁶ Acts 8. 22.

²⁷ Acts 5. 1-10.

²⁸ Gal. 2. 11-13.

²⁹ For the Greek word, see W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary*, under 'Envy, envying', and Trench's *Synonyms*, number xxvi.

³⁰ Peter noted from Isaiah 53 that our Lord was clear of all guile, 1 Pet. 2. 22.

³¹ For the 'confusion' between 'chrestos' and 'christos', see Tertullian Apol. 3.

³² Psalm 34 lies behind much of Peter's first letter. Perhaps Peter dropped the 'and see' because of his reference to 'milk'. The Psalm refers to Jehovah, but here it refers to Jesus; see 1 Pet. 2. 4.