

1:13-16—HOPE AND HOLINESS

The Text (NRSV)

¹³Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

What’s going on here?

After the opening blessing, which focused on God’s gifts and blessings to the people of God in the future, the present, and the past, the chapter turns to how we are to live *as* the gifted and blessed people of God. Here in chapter one, as well as the whole book, and really throughout many of the New Testament epistles, there will be this recurring pattern; *first*, we are told what God has done for us, and *then* we are told how we are called to respond to that divine initiative. Scholars will sometimes refer to this recurring flow of thought as the *indicative-imperative* pattern, the first referring to the statement of fact or reality (for example, ‘God has given us a living hope,’ in 1:3) and the second half referring to the call to action that follows (for example, ‘Set your hope on Jesus’ in 1:13).

We even get a sense of this shift in thought with the opening word of 1:13—“therefore,” which connects whatever follows with the statements of what God has done in 1:3-12. And for 1 Peter, one of the central ways we live out what God has done for us is to have a new mindset. The language of ‘preparing our minds’ and ‘disciplining ourselves’ suggests that 1 Peter wants us to become so immersed in our new identity as the people of God that we come to think differently. And of course from there, we will act differently—not in order to earn something or win a divine prize, but rather to grow more fully into who God has made us to be. Again, the initial action of God has *already* taken place—we already have *hope, inheritance, and salvation* guaranteed to us in Christ. We are now called to live into those things, and that includes our minds.

Our author himself does some shaping of our minds here in these verses by (1) connecting readers again to the identity of the Old Testament people of God and (2) disconnecting readers from their old ways of living, thinking, and acting.

The connection with Israel comes in two main places in 1:13-16. First, the phrase our NRSV text translates as “prepare your minds” is literally “gird up the loins of your minds.” On one level, this image is about getting ready for work and removing any hindrance—a sort of ancient equivalent to “rolling up your sleeves.” But it is also significant that the people of Israel were commanded to gird themselves in the same way at the Passover (as a symbol of their hasty departure from Egypt). 1 Peter then applies that imagery and story to Christians, many of whom were Gentiles (see 1:14). So more than just asking his audience to work hard generically, our author is telling us that those Old Testament stories and images are *ours*—or rather, we belong to *them*, rather than to old allegiances. This passage also concludes with a reference from the Hebrew Scriptures that further connects this Christian community with the ancient people of God. Christians are called to “be holy” just as Israel was—and for the same reason. Our holiness is to be grounded in God’s own holiness—our character is to be defined by God’s character.

At the same time, 1 Peter drives a wedge between the old ways these believers lived and their new way of life. Life outside of and prior to the Christian community is put into stark contrast with the life of faith. 1:14 uses language similar to Paul’s in Romans 12 about not being “conformed” to the old ways of life any longer. This contrast in between the Christian way of life and the ‘ignorant’ ways of life in the past can sound elitist, especially in a day when Christianity is, at least practically speaking, the religion of the establishment. We may want to cringe at language that sounds haughty and separatist. But if we place ourselves again in a 1st-century context, the need

SEE INSIDE:

1:13-16— WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?	1-2
CONNECTIONS: I LOVE YOU WITH ALL OF MY MIND?	2
1:17-25— WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?	3-4
SIDEBAR: SALVATION IS WHEN?	4
CONNECTIONS: LIVING WITH HOPE	4

LOOKING FOR MORE?

- The image of “girding your loins” or gathering up one’s robes to be ready to move comes from the story of the Passover in Exodus 12:11.
- The statement, “You shall be holy, for I am holy,” comes first from Leviticus 19:2. But see also the similar idea on Jesus’ lips in Matt. 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” and then Luke’s take in 6:36, “Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.”

1:13-16, CONTINUED

...continued from Page 1

for this kind of talk becomes more clear. In a time when Christians were first beginning to be excluded and marginalized for their faith, there was an increasing temptation to remain as much like the world as possible, so as not to stand out or call attention to one's Christianity. Our author will actually move in this direction later on in the book, stressing some ways in which Christians can emphasize their *similarity* to the society around them. But the first message we get from 1 Peter is that Christians are always going to be a distinct people to the extent that they are faithful. For congregations beginning to feel pressure from the world around them, 1:13-16 is a call not to dissolve into the prevailing culture and not to play the world's games by the old rules.

For Christians living today in a pluralistic American society where one can *get away* with being a Christian without drawing attention to oneself, this talk of being separate and holy can provoke strong reactions. On the one hand, it may sound sectarian and elitist, as though Christians are the only 'good' people or as though we must retreat to hide out from the 'evil' world around us. Understandably, we can be turned off if we can only think of being "holy" as being "holier-than-thou." The danger here, of course, is that we can be so afraid of offending others with a unique message and a unique way of living that we lose ourselves and our identity—and in fact the gospel. If we give up completely on being holy, we have ceased to be the people whom God has called and created us to be.

On the other hand, we can become engrossed with this image of the church as the noble warrior or moral superhero, going it alone into battle for truth and justice (and all too often, "the American way" gets lumped in there somehow), as though being "holy" makes us better than the rest of the world, or as though we are the source of our own holiness. It is all too easy for "holiness" to become an idol, just as much as the way fame, power, and wealth become idols to the rest of the world. And very quickly, Christians become arrogant and self-centered—once again ceasing to

be the people God has made us to be.

It is important to note, then, how 1 Peter avoids both of these pitfalls, at least in its original setting. Since the letter is addressing believers beginning to be excluded and pushed off to the side because of their different lifestyle, the message to continue in their new way of life, even if it means disconnecting from old ways of thought and action, is important. But there is not a sense of triumphalism or superiority here in the call to be holy. Rather, the church that is called to holiness is same the church that is being pushed off to the side and called irrelevant. If we would wish to be a "holy" people as God is holy, we must be willing to risk being marginalized ourselves and written off by the powers of the day. And if we're going to be truly faithful, we ought to find ourselves associating with the people already pushed off to the sides and placed at the bottom rung, since the God who we are called to "be holy" as is the God who redeemed a nation of slaves from Egypt to be the "chosen people."

1 Peter also avoids being pompous or self-absorbed in its talk of being holy by grounding our holiness in *God* rather than ourselves. For 1 Peter, being "holy" is not first and foremost about our moral self-improvement—it is a status of being chosen and set apart and beloved that comes from God first. The way we live out that belovedness always flows from the grace of God. And, equally important for 1 Peter is that our holiness is grounded in *hope*. That same "living hope" described in 1:3 as God's gift to us, the hope that enables us to face present troubles and to rejoice in God's work in us, is what sets us apart in daily life. Rather than being "better" than others, 1 Peter's image is more of the church as a people marching to the beat of a different drummer. We will not have to play power games like others because we trust in One who is head of all powers, and we are called to live and work for the needs of all people because our God does the same. When the only evidence points us to despair in the present, we are always pointed toward what God will yet do in the future. It is that hope that makes us "holy."

CONNECTIONS—I LOVE YOU WITH ALL OF MY MIND?

- ❖ For 1 Peter (as well as for Paul and much of the New Testament as a whole), love for God and service to Christ is put in terms of our *minds*, and not only our "hearts." What does it mean to love God with our minds?
- ❖ Would a "Christian" way of using our mind mean believing the right set of propositions about God? Accepting a certain set of writings as the only authority? Or might it include things like thinking and speaking with humility and love for the neighbor? What else might it include?
- ❖ 1 Peter quotes the Old Testament adage that we are to be holy as God is holy. So how is God holy? First of all, what does it mean to be "holy" to you? How do you hear the word used usually? How does 1 Peter use it? How do we see God's holiness in the whole sweeping story of the Bible? For example, is Jesus "holy" when he eats with prostitutes and tax collectors? When he dies on a cross between thieves? How and where do we see God's holiness today?

1:17-25—THE OBJECT OF OUR HOPE**The Text (NRSV)**

¹⁷If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

²²Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

²⁴For

*“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.*

*The grass withers,
and the flower falls,*

²⁵but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

What’s going on here?

Once again, the letter grounds the actions and attitudes of Christians in the acts and character of God through Christ. This passage pivots on what Jesus has done for us, centering on his death and on God’s act of raising him up from the dead. Jesus’ death is compared to a sacrificial lamb’s death (and to the Passover lamb also, which was supposed to be “without blemish” as well—see Exodus 12:5), as well as to a ransom. The language of ransom is not, as we often use the word today, about paying a kidnapper to release a hostage. But rather, the Greek word we translate as “ransom” finds its home in the world of Greco-Roman slavery (although the idea is also present in Hebrew literature as well). Slaves can be bought out of slavery and freed at a certain price, or *ransom*. And so here, 1 Peter has appropriated that imagery for the life of Christians who have come from Gentile backgrounds—they have been bought at a price, as it were, (see also Mark 10:45 and 1 Cor. 6:20) and released from their old slaveries. But of course, rather than a literal slavery to a household or master, 1 Peter envisions a whole way of life in the past as a kind of slavery—a slavery from which we have now been freed (the Gospel of John goes in this direction, too, in 8:34ff, where Jesus talks about sin as enslavement; so does Rom. 6:15ff). The imagery that comes from the Passover story, too, also suggests God’s action to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Again, 1 Peter wants its readers to understand themselves in light of that same story—they have been freed from their old ways of living and thinking and acting, and now they are freed *for* something.

This is an important idea for 1 Peter, as for the whole witness of Scripture. Freedom, for the people of God, is **both** about being released *from* something that has held us back (whether a literal slavery as in the exodus, or from the power of sin, as in much of the New Testament’s language), but it is also about being freed *for* something (as the freed slaves become a united people living by God’s covenant in the Torah, or as Paul says we have become “slaves to God” or to “righteousness” in Romans). If we have been freed from something, we are not then left to fend for ourselves or to figure things out alone, but rather we have been made into something new and called into a new way of being. Here in 1 Peter, that new way of being is expressed supremely in “genuine mutual love.” That is quite literally at the *heart* of what it looks like to be the people of God—to love others with a genuine and deep love. Later chapters will develop what that love looks like and how we come to express it, but for now, our author is content to call us simply to love.

And before going any further into how we love or what we are to do, 1 Peter goes back and emphasizes again what God has done for us already and how that redefines who we are. Once again, 1 Peter uses language of “new birth” (probably a reference to baptism) to say that God has already made us into a new people, and that this action of God, since it comes from God is permanent and non-negotiable. The contrast in 1:23-25 is important for our author—entry into the people of God is not something that can fade away or give out; it is an accomplished act of God. And because it is *God* who has brought us into this new community, our belonging cannot be dissolved by any outside (or inside!) forces.

The fact that God has given us the new birth into the people of God is important also because it reframes the call to show love for one another. All too easily, love can turn into a work—an accomplishment of *mine* to earn my place, or a new rule to follow which will win me eternal life if I follow it. But for the whole New Testament, our love for others and for God is always the second act—it follows God’s act of love for us. So we do not love others *in order* to be the people of God or to be loved by God, but rather *because* we are both already. That does not mean that the deep (and as will be said later, self-sacrificial) love mentioned here is optional or only a feature of mature Christian life. For 1 Peter, it is a matter of who we are now. Much as the band of unorganized slaves was freed from bondage and then given a new identity as the people of God, so 1 Peter sees our status. God has made us a new people, and in fact has done it apart from our willing it first or our consent (see the emphasis in 1:20 on God’ plan from eternity). But now that we have been brought into this new people—we have been given a new identity, a new way of being, and a new Lord in whom to place our trust and hope.